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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 20 October 2020

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The House met at half-past Eleven 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

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Local Covid-19 Restrictions: Economic Support

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What plans he has to provide additional economic support to areas affected by local covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement. [907759]

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): What plans he has to provide additional economic support to areas affected by local covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement. [907774]

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What plans he has to provide additional economic support to areas affected by local covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement. [907779]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): Earlier this month, I announced that businesses forced to close as a result of local restrictions will be eligible for a grant of up to £3,000 a month. Their employees will be protected through the expanded job support programme and councils will receive extra resources to help with local track and trace, enforcement and compliance.

Andrew Gwynne [V]: All that Greater Manchester is asking for is proper financial support for our businesses, our self-employed and our lowest paid after 12 weeks of failed lockdown measures and as we face many more uncertain months ahead. When the Prime Minister is reported as struggling to live on his £150,000 a year salary, how does he think the lowest paid in Greater Manchester will cope on two thirds of national minimum wage? Last night, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government offered just £22 million for a city region of 2.8 million people. That is less than the £25 million he granted to his own town centre. Why do this Government hate Greater Manchester?

Rishi Sunak: It is disappointing to hear the hon. Gentleman's tone. It is obviously a very difficult time for many people in this country as we evolve our response to this virus, but what we need is people acting in a constructive spirit, and that is what my right hon.

Friend the Communities Secretary is actively offering to do. I hope those conversations are happening as we speak.

Greater Manchester is being treated exactly the same as every part of our United Kingdom. These are national support schemes that have been put in place that help the most vulnerable in our society. The hon. Gentleman raised a number of questions. As he will know, there are national schemes to protect businesses, to protect employees and to provide support to his local authority.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Repeated local lockdowns with no end in sight are killing our economy in South Shields. In the past lockdown, we received £26 million of support. I have been advised that the financial package offered to us this time, should we end up in tier 3, would be just over £1 million. Can the Chancellor confirm or deny that insulting amount?

Rishi Sunak: I am glad the hon. Lady recognises the economic damage that lockdowns do, which is why, when we had this debate last week, I did pose the question as to why the Opposition were suggesting a national lockdown with no end in sight without commenting on the damage that would do to people's jobs and livelihoods. With respect to support for local authorities entering tier 3, as I have set out there is a national funding formula that provides a per capita amount to the local authority of up to £8 per head at the highest tier to provide support for local enforcement, compliance and track and trace. On top of that, there is support that the national Government provide for businesses that are closed. Their employees can be put on the job support scheme, and, in addition, my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary can talk to local authorities about providing bespoke extra support as required.

Afzal Khan [V]: People and businesses in my constituency and across Greater Manchester are suffering. They are facing an uncertain winter with insufficient support. Last night, the Government offered just £22 million to the 2.8 million people in Greater Manchester. That comes to just £8 a head to support local people and businesses during the months ahead. Other areas were given double that amount, despite having just half the population. Does the Minister seriously believe this is a fair deal for Greater Manchester, and, if so, would he like to take this opportunity to apologise to those Mancunians who will lose or have already lost their livelihoods?

Rishi Sunak: With the greatest respect, the hon. Gentleman is mistaken in his characterisation of the support provided and confusing two different things. He is absolutely right: the support is £8 a head. That is the national funding formula that is provided to all local authorities entering tier 3. That is the same as is provided in Lancashire and indeed, in the Liverpool city region, and that is the amount that he refers to, which is done on an equitable basis for all local authorities. The additional amounts he talks about were reached in negotiation with my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary and representatives of the Government. That offer remains available to Greater Manchester, and that is why I hope they engage in these negotiations constructively.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend has done a great deal to support jobs in our country, but he will know that lockdowns destroy jobs and lead to increased mental illness and a smaller economy that for many years will be less able to look after our most vulnerable. Does he agree that the Government should come forward urgently with a comprehensive review of the impact of lockdowns, not just in terms of epidemiology and the effect on the NHS, important though that is, but in terms of the economy, businesses, jobs and the country's social wellbeing?

Rishi Sunak: As ever, my right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He is right about the damage to not only non-covid health outcomes but people's jobs and livelihoods and the long-term damage that that will cause to all our health outcomes. With regard to projections, he will know that both the Office for Budget Responsibility and the International Monetary Fund project 3% scarring, which will mean our economy potentially being £70 billion to £80 billion smaller in the future than it otherwise would have been. As he rightly says, that will obviously have an impact on our ability to fund public services and protect people's jobs and livelihoods.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, when the Prime Minister was asked whether a circuit breaker is likely, he said, "I rule out nothing". Does the Chancellor rule it out—yes or no?

Rishi Sunak: Of course I agree with the Prime Minister.

Anneliese Dodds: That appears to be slightly different from the message we received from the Chancellor last week. This morning, a member of the Monetary Policy Committee stated that

"the bulk of spending reductions are due to restrictions that people voluntarily impose on themselves",

and that

"higher virus prevalence is associated with weaker economic performance."

Research suggests that not undertaking a circuit breaker now could cost our economy an additional £110 billion—that is based on IMF figures, by the way—due to changes in behaviour that people make to avoid contracting the virus and the knock-on impact of those on economic output. What is the Chancellor's estimate of the cost of not undertaking a circuit breaker and continuing with this rolling programme of regional restrictions?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady talks about rolling programmes. It is clear that the Labour party believes that we should have a rolling programme of national lockdowns. That would be enormously damaging for people's jobs and livelihoods, causing unnecessary pain and suffering in parts of the country where virus prevalence is low. A localised approach is the best approach.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: We are not in a significantly different public health position now from when the Chancellor announced furlough on 20 March. Pubs and restaurants and hospitality venues are being asked to close, but this time, he is leaving people with significantly less support. Will he take action today to extend the furlough scheme, to ensure

that people are protected and that those who have lost out and been excluded from support can be included this time?

Rishi Sunak: We have announced the job support scheme, which will take effect on 1 November, following the closure of the coronavirus job retention scheme. Those who are working in closed businesses can be placed on that scheme and receive 67% of their wages—an amount comparable with all our European peers—at very little, if no, expense to the employer, helping them to protect those jobs.

Alison Thewliss: Sixty-seven per cent. of wages for people who are on minimum wage jobs—the lowest paid in our society—is simply not good enough and gives them absolutely no incentive to self-isolate and stick to the rules. The Scottish Government have announced a grant of £500 for the lowest paid, but the UK Government may swipe that back and pick the pockets of the poorest in taxation. Will the Chancellor go further than he has so far and exempt that £500 grant to the poorest in our society from taxation?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady talks about the Scottish Government introducing a £500 grant. It was the UK Government who introduced a £500 grant and provided Barnett funding for the Scottish Government to do the same. She is right that the grant payment is there to help those who are most vulnerable, so that they can isolate, and it provides an incentive for them to do so.

Support for Businesses: Covid-19

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to support businesses affected by the covid-19 outbreak. [907760]

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to support businesses affected by the covid-19 outbreak. [907764]

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to support businesses in sectors that remain subject to covid-19 restrictions. [907778]

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to support businesses affected by the covid-19 outbreak. [907783]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): The Government recognise that the pandemic has caused extreme disruption to the economy. That is why we have delivered one of the most comprehensive and generous support packages anywhere in the world, worth over £190 billion.

Dr Mullan: I recognise the enormous amount of support that has been given to businesses in Crewe and Nantwich. I have spoken to many that would not have survived without it, and I know the pressure on public finances. But hospitality businesses such as the one I visited, Giovanni's in Crewe, will really struggle with the 10 pm curfew and the ban on household mixing. Can the Government look again at what we can do for businesses that might technically be allowed to open but will struggle under those circumstances?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is right that there has been disruption to businesses in tier 2 areas. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has cut VAT from 20% to 5% and extended that to 31 March and also introduced a 12-month business rates holiday.

Antony Higginbotham: Over the last few days, businesses across Burnley and Padiham, from bookkeepers to bars and pubs, have had to close as the county of Lancashire has entered tier 3 restrictions. While it is welcome that those businesses are getting Government support through the extension of furlough and business grants, there are many more in the supply chain that will be equally impacted because their end suppliers are not there. Could my right hon. Friend set out what measures are available to support them over the next couple of months?

Steve Barclay: As a Lancastrian myself, I am acutely aware of the impact on the county of Lancashire, which is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government negotiated the additional business support. That builds on the measures set out by the Chancellor to support businesses not just through the job support scheme, but through the furlough bonus.

Caroline Nokes: It is not just businesses in tiers 2 and 3 that have been impacted; in tier 1, some sectors are still unable to trade, suffering from a total loss of business. Does my right hon. Friend agree with the head of the IMF that

“now is not yet the time to balance the books”,

and will he consider extending support to businesses that still cannot work in these times?

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend is right about the pressure on businesses in tier 1 as well. That is why, in the package the Chancellor has set out, has been the extension of loan facilities to help those businesses with their cash flow. In the south-east region, which my right hon. Friend represents, the total is some £0.5 billion of support.

Mrs Miller: Many thousands of small businesses have already benefited from the measures that my right hon. Friend and his colleagues have put in place. As we move forward, may I urge him to keep a small business focus, particularly for small brewers? Duty levels are a crucial part of their business viability, and may I urge him to keep small breweries' relief in place, as it is helping to safeguard the future of many small breweries not just in Hampshire but throughout the United Kingdom?

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely valid point about the impact on that sector. That is why the Treasury is reviewing small breweries' relief and, indeed, the Exchequer Secretary has taken forward reforms, at the industry's request, to fix issues in the current relief design.

Equitable Life: Compensation

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): If the Government will take steps to ensure that victims of the Equitable Life scandal receive full compensation for their losses. [907761]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): In 2010, the Government set up a payment scheme to make payments of up to £1.5 billion to eligible policyholders. Since the scheme closed in 2016, the Government's position on this issue has been clear: there is no further funding in addition to that £1.5 billion and this issue is considered closed.

Joanna Cherry [V]: Many self-employed people and small business owners feel let down by the covid response, and the same type of people were let down 10 years ago today when victims of the Equitable Life scandal were told they would only get 22% of the money they had lost. The Treasury has ignored hard-working people like my constituents for a decade, so please will the Chancellor reconsider and commit to providing Equitable Life victims with the compensation they deserve?

John Glen: The Government continue to pay out to annuitants who were in payment from 2010. Indeed, we have a £100 million contingency to ensure that they are properly provided for. The Government were completely transparent about the calculation methodology and worked with the action group, the Equitable Members Action Group, to give explanations to policyholders. We met actuaries to ensure that it was as fair as it possibly could be, so the Government's position on this remains as I have stated.

Women's and Girls' Health

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to improve the health of women and girls. [907762]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): The Government are providing an extra £33.9 billion to the NHS to deliver its long-term plan, which has actions to tackle inequalities affecting women and girls. This includes commitments to 50% reductions in stillbirth, maternal mortality and neonatal mortality by 2025, increasing access to perinatal mental health services and expanding human papillomavirus vaccination to protect against cervical cancer, among many other examples.

Mrs Latham [V]: How will the Minister encourage young women to pursue further education or training to maximise their earning potential and career prospects, rather than feeling pressurised to start a family while still in their teenage years?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is rightly championing the importance of education and has done a lot of work to raise these issues. Where a young woman has been identified as taken out of school, the local authority has a responsibility to locate and contact that young woman and work with her to find a suitable place in post-16 education. The Government also provide targeted support to help young people overcome financial barriers to participation through the 16-to-19 bursary fund.

Apprenticeships

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on supporting young people into apprenticeships. [907763]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): Apprenticeships are a job with training, and they benefit people of all ages and backgrounds, especially young people starting their career. The plan for jobs will help to kickstart the nation's economic recovery. As part of the plan, we have introduced a payment of £2,000 for employers in England who hire new apprentices aged under 25 and £1,500 for employers who hire new apprentices aged over 25 before 31 January 2021.

Aaron Bell: Newcastle College in my constituency is a fantastic further education provider, which has invested significantly in its facilities and staff for its trainees and the 850 different local employers it supports. It has been judged outstanding by Ofsted in all areas, including apprenticeship provision. However, it is concerned about the dramatic reduction in training vacancies, and its actual apprenticeship starts are down by two thirds year on year, so will the Minister join me in praising the work it has done so far and set out what incentives employers have not only to take on but also to keep on apprentices to the end of their training?

Kemi Badenoch: I congratulate Newcastle College and all it is doing to support learners to develop the skills they need to thrive. We know that apprenticeships are proven: 91% of apprentices in 2016-17 remained in employment or went on to further training afterwards. In recognition of the importance of apprenticeships and the disruption caused by covid-19, the Government have introduced payments to incentivise hiring new apprentices and flexibilities to support existing ones through their programmes.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Let us look at the record. Capital investment in further education is running at less than half the level put in by Labour 10 years ago. Apprenticeship starts are down 43,000 this year, with the biggest drop among under-19s, and yesterday we learned about the short-sighted, vindictive move to scrap the union learning fund. Why is it that, when the need is for help now with new skills and retraining, this Government have done so much to kick the ladder of opportunity away from working people?

Kemi Badenoch: I think that it is probably a good time to remind the right hon. Gentleman that in the Budget we actually increased significantly the amount of money spent on further education. On the union learning grants, I refer him to the Department for Education Ministers who made this decision; I am sure they can write to him again on this. But the Government remain committed to investing in adult skills and retraining: in addition to the plan for jobs, at the comprehensive spending review we will be allocating our new £2.5 billion national skills fund to help more young people learn new skills and prepare for jobs for the future.

VAT: Tourism and Hospitality

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effect of the temporary changes in VAT on businesses in the tourism and hospitality sectors. [907765]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The temporary reduced rate for the tourism and hospitality sectors came into effect on 15 July 2020 and is helping

to support the cash flow and viability of over 150,000 businesses and to protect 2.4 million jobs across the UK. On 24 September, the Government announced that they will extend the temporary reduced rate so that it now ends on 31 March 2021.

Mary Robinson: We all want to see a sensible solution to the debate over the covid restrictions in Greater Manchester, but a move from tier 2 will mean the hospitality sector in Cheadle faces the additional blow of tier 3 restrictions, and while reduced VAT in recent months is welcome, businesses in tier 3 will be unable to benefit from the extended scheme. Therefore, in addition to the comprehensive support package, will the Minister consider extending the reduced VAT scheme further in areas that go into tier 3, so that they can do business on that basis for as long as businesses in other parts of the country?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will know, it has already been extended and she will also be aware that we have put in place a scheme for people who have VAT debt, to allow a payment process that fits their schedule. As the Chancellor has said, to support local authorities at very high alert and to protect public health and local economies, an additional £5 a head, £8 in total, has been made available. That means we have committed up to £465 million in funding for English local authorities through the tiering scheme, and we will announce further details of the eligible expenditures under this scheme.

Universal Credit: Covid-19

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on the economy of removing the temporary uplift in universal credit from April 2021 while the covid-19 outbreak continues. [907766]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): The £20 per week increase in the universal credit standard allowance and working tax credit basic element forms just one part of the package of support the Government have provided to protect people's jobs and incomes, including income support schemes.

Stephen Timms: The Government were right to increase universal credit and working tax credit by £20 a week. Surely, it would now be inconceivable to remove those increases in April as planned, before the pandemic is even over. Does the Minister accept that of the indirect levers available to the Government to stimulate what is, as we have heard already, going to be a weak economy for some time, measures that raise the incomes of low-income households are the most effective, and benefit increases are a good example?

Steve Barclay: I am grateful that the right hon. Gentleman recognises the additional £9 billion of support that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has put into welfare. That is reflected, as the right hon. Gentleman will further recognise, in the distributional analysis showing that that has protected those on the lowest incomes. That support is temporary, but it does extend to the spring, and it helps those families facing covid with the challenges over the coming months.

Fiscal Support: Covid-19

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): What fiscal support he is providing to mitigate the economic effects of the covid-19 outbreak. [907767]

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What fiscal support he is providing to mitigate the economic effects of the covid-19 outbreak. [907769]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government have provided an unprecedented package of support for people, businesses and public services throughout the UK, totalling more than £200 billion. That has included helping to pay the wages of 9.6 million people through the job retention scheme and protecting the livelihoods of 2.6 million self-employed workers through the self-employment income support scheme.

Allan Dorans [V]: The Scottish Government are doing what they can to support individuals, businesses and those who have been excluded by the Chancellor from receiving any grants, loans or payment holidays. They are hampered in doing so by not having the autonomy of borrowing powers to meet the unique requirements of the Scottish economy. Will the Government heed repeated calls for the devolution of borrowing powers to enable the Scottish Government to provide additional targeted assistance to those individuals and sectors that they have identified as most in need?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the current state of affairs was agreed between the Scottish Government and the UK Government after exhaustive consultation and discussion by the Silk commission, and that remains the set-up to which the Scottish Government have committed themselves.¹

Douglas Chapman [V]: With the dual viruses of Brexit and covid-19, we are heading for a winter of discontent and a longer period of mass unemployment. With no Budget announcement, what are the Chancellor's economic advisers telling him about the Government's preparations for mass unemployment and the sectors that will be worst hit?

Jesse Norman: The Chancellor has been very clear that because we are in the midst of a pandemic, we are likely to see, and we are indeed already seeing, some redundancies. There is no doubt about the seriousness of the financial and economic situation that we are in. I remind the hon. Gentleman with regard to Scotland that there has been some £7 billion of support for the Scottish Government in dealing with the pandemic and its economic effects, over and above the £21.3 billion provided through the regular Barnett process.

Mr Speaker: May I welcome Abena Oppong-Asare to the Dispatch Box as shadow Minister?

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. In regions facing tier 3 restrictions, many businesses have been forced to close. In tier 2 regions, many businesses, especially in hospitality, are open in name only, running up all the costs without the customers. What do the Government have to say to those businesses that realistically cannot operate but are not legally required to close?

Jesse Norman: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. I mourn the loss to his new job of her predecessor, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), with whom I happily fenced over many sessions on the Finance Bill.

The answer to the hon. Lady's question is, of course, that we are acutely aware of the financial costs on those businesses, as we are of those on businesses that have been forced to close, and that is why we have put in place an evolving and comprehensive programme of support for business.

Business Support Grant: Local Authorities

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): If he will hold discussions with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on the potential merits of reopening business support grant funding schemes for allocation by local authorities. [907768]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): I hold regular discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. The original national business grant schemes provided support to small businesses that faced fixed property-related costs during the strict lockdown period.

Kate Osamor [V]: I thank the Minister for his reply, but is he aware that in Enfield only 189 small businesses received a discretionary grant, even though 330 applied for one? In view of further restrictions in London, will the Minister commit to urgently releasing extra funding to Enfield Council to ensure that those businesses that previously missed out can reapply for financial support?

Steve Barclay: The previous grant was for businesses that had been forced to close. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has allocated additional funding through the local restrictions support grant scheme for businesses that are forced to close, with an additional £1,500 per two-week closure period. As the hon. Lady said, the previous grant was discretionary and local authorities therefore had discretion as to how many firms benefited from it.

Self-employed People: Covid-19

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support self-employed people affected by the covid-19 outbreak. [907770]

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What fiscal steps he is taking to support self-employed people not eligible for the self-employment income support scheme. [907781]

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support self-employed people affected by the covid-19 outbreak. [907785]

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the extension of the self-employment income support scheme. [907788]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government have taken unprecedented steps to support the self-employed, as the House will be aware.

1. [Official Report, 23 October 2020, Vol. 682, c. 4MC.]

So far, the Government have paid out £13.4 billion of support through the self-employment income support scheme.

Andrew Lewer: I recently had a Zoom call with Deborah Annetts, the CEO of the Incorporated Society of Musicians, and Jordan and Steve from a local Northampton band called The Keepers, and they highlighted the problems that self-employed musicians currently face. Will my right hon. Friend support struggling musicians such as The Keepers by considering either a freelance support scheme or a box office top-up to help to make socially distanced gigs feasible?

Jesse Norman: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. With a name like Jesse Norman—my hon. Friend will know that there was an American opera singer, now alas dead, of the same name—and as someone who has been involved in arts organisations and, indeed, as a pretty incompetent musician myself, I am extremely aware of the concern that he raises, and rightly so. He will know that the Government have announced a £1.57 billion culture recovery fund, of which some £330 million has been awarded to date to nearly 2,000 cultural organisations. That funding is designed to help performances to restart, to protect jobs and to create opportunities for freelancers across the country. It is also worth mentioning that we have done a considerable amount of work on the film and TV production restart scheme, much of which will have the same effect when it is properly up and running.

Chris Elmore: I have been contacted every day by sole traders and small independents who have fallen through the Government's schemes. They are excluded and do not qualify for Government support. According to ExcludedUK, 1.6 million people are excluded from any of the Government's self-support schemes. Last week, in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), the Chief Secretary said that these people had now been covered. They have not been covered. They are excluded and they are desperate for help. Will the Minister set out what support he will provide to the people who are excluded in this country from self-support grants?

Jesse Norman: I am sure that whatever the Chief Secretary said last week was absolutely correct. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the scheme we have is designed to be as comprehensive as we can make it, consistent with the wider package we are offering and with support rapidly for the largest number of the most vulnerable people. That was the purpose of the scheme. We have continued the theme of supporting the self-employed through the job support scheme, and of course, that itself forms part of a much wider pattern of support for the industry and for businesses.

John Lamont: I very much welcome everything the Chancellor has done to protect jobs, businesses and livelihoods in my constituency and across Scotland. Many of the self-employed constituents in my area will be very grateful for the third grant that is now available to them. Can the Minister set out the number of people who will be eligible for the grant in Scotland?

Jesse Norman: We are unable to predict the exact take-up of the SEISS grant extension across the United Kingdom, but the latest statistics on the second grant

demonstrate that self-employed people in Scotland are continuing to receive unprecedented levels of support under the scheme. As of 20 September, 64% of assessed individuals were found to be eligible in Scotland, with 126,000 claims being made, amounting to £318 million of Government support.

Taiwo Owatemi: My constituent Rebecca launched a new business, Purdy's Pet Shop, in Coventry North West just before the lockdown. Rebecca was told that she was ineligible for the self-employment income support scheme and faced a frustrating few weeks until she was eventually granted a coronavirus business interruption loan. That is just one business among many that fell through the gaping holes of the first self-employment income support scheme. Now it, and many other businesses in my constituency, will also fall through the gaps in the new extension.

Constituents have contacted me about how anxious they feel about how they will survive now that support has dropped to just 70%. Can the Minister tell me how adequate he believes the extension of the self-employment income support scheme is? What will he do to support my constituents who are falling through the gaps of the current scheme and are worried about the reduced financial support it offers?

Jesse Norman: I salute the hon. Lady's constituent for setting up a new business and for showing the entrepreneurship and aspiration that characterise British business at its best. As she will be aware, we are engaged in the process of supporting vulnerable businesses and people. In the self-employment area, we are doing that through the extension to the job support scheme. She will know that that forms just one element of a much wider picture, including the loans that she has described, tax deferrals, rental support and increased levels of universal credit.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with the concerns raised by colleagues cross-party on this issue. It is interesting that every time the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box, he bats off extra support for those people, yet some of them may have qualified for bounce back loans. I am interested to know whether the Treasury knows how many qualified for bounce back loans, because a recent National Audit Office report suggests that the Treasury does not know where the money has gone and what it is being used for, so perhaps he can elucidate.

Jesse Norman: I admire the hon. Lady's ingenuity in introducing a conversation about bounce back loans to a discussion about the self-employed scheme. The answer is that I do not have the numbers to hand, but of course, if those numbers are available, I will make sure that we write to her with the detail.

Job Support Scheme

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): What proportion of jobs his Department estimates will be supported through the Government's Job Support Scheme.

[907773]

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): What proportion of jobs his Department estimates will be supported through the Government's Job Support Scheme.

[907780]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): Over the course of the coronavirus job retention scheme, more than 9 million jobs were protected through the furlough scheme. The job support scheme that replaces it will come into force on 1 November. Of course, it is impossible to predict today how many people will benefit. That will depend on the exact path of the virus and the restrictions in place.

Zarah Sultana: Since March, unemployment has doubled in Coventry South. The Government are replacing furlough with the utterly inadequate job support scheme. Research from the Institute for Public Policy Research found that, of the 2 million jobs at risk, it will save only 10%. Where it is used by businesses that are required to close, two thirds of wages is simply not enough for low-paid workers. Is the Chancellor happy to see 1.8 million jobs go? Could he live on two thirds of the minimum wage? If not, he should extend the furlough scheme for the industries that desperately need it.

Rishi Sunak: When we announced the job support scheme, it was, in fact, warmly welcomed by several business groups and trade unions, with which I was happy to work in designing the scheme. I take the issue of jobs very seriously; it remains my highest priority. Although I cannot protect every single job, we will throw absolutely everything we can at protecting, saving and creating as many jobs as possible, which is why we have a comprehensive plan for jobs. The job support scheme is just one element of that. Indeed, I am pleased to say that the kickstart scheme is shortly due to launch, which will provide hope and opportunity to hundreds of thousands of young people.

Naz Shah: A report published this week by the political consultancy WPI Strategy, commissioned by Tesco, ranked Bradford West at No. 3 in its need to be levelled up. Last week, another report found that my constituency has the highest rise in the rate of child poverty in Yorkshire and Humber. The Chancellor will be well aware that it also ranks seventh highest in the country for unemployment. With all that going on, and having been under local restrictions for almost three months, I ask the Chancellor whether he feels that Bradford West can afford any more job losses and whether he believes that it is in need of targeted support from the Treasury.

Rishi Sunak: In Bradford and elsewhere, we would not like to see any job losses, but the reality is that what is happening to our economy means that, sadly, many people—almost three quarters of a million—have already lost their job and many more will. That is why our comprehensive plan for jobs aims to protect, support and create jobs in every part of our United Kingdom. That will provide hope and opportunity to people, whether it is the kickstart scheme, as I mentioned, or the opportunity for new training and skills delivered through the Prime Minister's announcement of a lifetime skills guarantee.

People on Low Incomes: Covid-19

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support people on low incomes during the covid-19 outbreak. [907775]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government have provided significant support to those on low incomes. We have introduced additional support through the welfare system, estimated by the OBR to be worth more than £9 billion this year, including increasing universal credit and working tax credit by £20 per week, as well as £500 million of local authority hardship funding and £500 payments for those in low income households who have to self-isolate.

Imran Ahmad Khan: Over the weekend, I visited numerous businesses in Horbury, such as the Green Berry and the Black Olive delicatessen. Mr Speaker, they form a fantastic independent retail offering, and perhaps on your next visit to Wakefield to witness Trinity prevail over your club, a little retail therapy could be a soothing balm before your long journey home across the Pennines. But failing your patronage, Mr Speaker, business owners there have told me that the imposition of tier 2 measures has sapped consumer confidence, which is the oil with which the economy is greased. Will my hon. Friend the Minister confirm that he will use all his creativity to focus HMT strategy on stimulating confidence in the consumer economy to support these businesses, and to consider tax reform, should it be conducive to those aims?

John Glen: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the support that we have put in place, but also to the challenges that remain. In his own constituency, 14,500 have benefited from the furlough scheme, £28.4 million of business grants have been made available, and £20.3 million of business rates relief has been provided. Looking to the future, I can assure him that all Treasury Ministers will be using rigorous analysis and thinking as we work with the Chancellor as we approach the next Budget.

Fiscal Support: Job Retention and Incomes

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): What comparative assessment he has made of the effectiveness of fiscal support for (a) job retention and (b) incomes during the covid-19 outbreak in the UK and internationally. [907776]

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): What comparative assessment he has made of the effectiveness of fiscal support for (a) job retention and (b) incomes during the covid-19 outbreak in the UK and internationally. [907777]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The pandemic has unfolded at different paces in countries around the world, and countries have acted in a way that works best for their respective economies. In this country, the Government have put in place more than £200 billion-worth of support to protect people's jobs, businesses and incomes, and that is one of the most comprehensive economic responses of its kind anywhere in the world. Our goal remains to continue to protect those livelihoods, those jobs and those businesses while we allow the economy to adapt to the changing circumstances.

Mark Logan: Britain's fiscal support outshines that of our European neighbours, but constituencies such as mine have never really emerged from the economic

lockdown. Employment and many businesses are being stretched, and the Mayor of Greater Manchester needs to learn from Bolton Wanderers and start playing ball. Will the Treasury constantly review the financial help on offer for those faced with tier 3 restrictions and, indeed, consider some of the ideas that were forthcoming from my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) in relation to VAT reduction for the hospitality industry?

Jesse Norman: I am delighted that my hon. Friend draws Bolton Wanderers into a discussion on the Floor of the House of Commons—it is a very fine club. He will know that we have committed almost £500 million of support to English local authorities through the tiering system, and that that comes on top of the £300 million already allocated to local authorities for test, trace and contain activity. He should also be aware that there are grants of up to £3,000 per month, depending on rateable value, through the local restrictions support grant, as well as the expansion that the Chancellor has recently announced to the job support scheme. All of that forms part of our comprehensive package.

Mr Speaker: As a Bolton fan, I expect better results in the future.

Harriett Baldwin: At the beginning of the pandemic, the OECD forecast that unemployment in the UK would rise to 9.1% by the end of this year. It recently revised its forecast down to 5.3%. Can the Minister confirm that the winter jobs plan will continue to provide the right kind of support to help our flexible labour market to adapt to the pandemic?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the point about the OECD's forecasts, and also the astonishing flexibility and effectiveness of our labour markets. She will know that the Government continue to adapt their response and, as the Chancellor mentioned a few minutes ago, we will shortly be launching the £2 billion kickstarter scheme alongside the job support scheme. That will be a tremendous boost for the prospects of young people across the country.

Economic Growth and Productivity: UK Nations and Regions

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure long-term equity of (a) economic growth and (b) productivity throughout the nations and regions of the UK. [907782]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): The Government are committed to levelling up opportunity so that all people and places across the UK benefit from economic growth, and covid-19's impact has made that more important. From the £2 billion new kickstart scheme to create new jobs for 16 to 24-year-olds to the £1 billion for local projects to boost local recovery, we see that the Department will protect jobs, support economic growth and boost productivity across all nations and regions of the UK.

Mr Clarke: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. One of the best tools to level up economic opportunity across the UK after we leave the European Union will be freeports. Does she recognise the strong case for

designating Teesport, and will she praise the work of PD Ports and my friend the Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, in preparing a very strong bid?

Kemi Badenoch: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that freeports will benefit communities across the UK by unleashing the economic potential of our ports, as he will very well know, having been one of my predecessors in this role. I thank him, the Mayor of Tees Valley and my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) for their support on this agenda. Our consultation response, published on 7 October, confirms our intent to deliver freeports by 2021, and the free port locations will be selected according to an open, transparent bidding process.

Topical Questions

[907821] **Jacob Young** (Redcar) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): This Government have put in place a £200 billion programme of support to help jobs and businesses throughout this crisis. Although we will not be able to save every job or business, we remain committed to doing what we can to protect the economy and people's livelihoods at this difficult time.

Jacob Young: This Government have taken extraordinary steps to protect the economy and now we must take the extraordinary steps to unlock it. Uncertainty stemming from coronavirus and the volatility of the oil price is leading to delayed investment in the Tees Valley. One thing that could break the deadlock in that investment would be the announcement of a freeport in Teesside. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that he will not delay the roll-out of 10 new freeports? Does he agree that a freeport in Teesside could lead to thousands of new jobs for my constituents in Redcar and Cleveland?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend—like my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) and the Mayor of the Tees Valley, Ben Houchen—is a fantastic champion for the freeports agenda. They are all absolutely right: this policy can unlock investment and growth, and therefore create jobs in parts of our country that want to see that growth. I can assure my hon. Friend that I look forward to receiving the bid that, no doubt, he and his colleagues are putting together for us.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I am sure the Chancellor will agree that confidence will not return to our economy until we are able to control the virus with an effective test, trace and isolate system, yet the current system is not working and was described by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies as having a "marginal impact" on transmission. Will he explain why, although he has funded the system generously, it is failing so badly?

Rishi Sunak: I am glad that the hon. Lady recognises that we have provided substantial funding for the test and trace system. Although there have been times when we would all have wished that the response would be faster—that is indeed what is happening now—it is

worth bearing in mind how far we have come since the beginning of this crisis, when 10,000 or so tests a day were being done. We are now marching towards our target of half a million daily tests. That is enormous progress and it will make a difference in our ability to suppress the spread of this virus.

Bridget Phillipson: In March, the Chancellor was clear that if people could not earn a living by going out to work, it was the Government's job to step in, "whatever it takes". By July, he was moving away from that belief and today he has moved so far that his employment support schemes have more holes than a Swiss cheese. Will he tell the House: was he wrong in March or is he wrong now?

Rishi Sunak: I did say we would do what it takes, and I think that £200 billion later, with almost 9 million jobs protected, we see the evidence that we have done. We will continue to do what it takes to protect this economy and people's livelihoods.

[907822] **Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con) [V]: The Government's economic support packages have been some of the most generous anywhere, and they have been essential sticking plasters from which many of our constituents have benefited. However, given that covid may be with us for some time and that the economy is in transition, may I encourage the Government to think more strategically and perhaps draw lessons from, for example, Margaret Thatcher's enterprise allowance scheme, which helped hundreds of thousands of people, over some years, to transition from unemployment to self-employment?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We should have an eye on our recovery and he is absolutely right that entrepreneurship can play an important part in driving that recovery, which is why during the crisis we announced the future fund to help to provide financing for start-up entrepreneurial companies. I am also happy to have a look at the enterprise allowance scheme. My hon. Friend will be aware of the start-up loan scheme, which does something similar by providing Government-discounted and funded loans to the budding entrepreneurs of tomorrow.

[907820] **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): The £63 million of funding for emergency assistance grants for food and essential supplies is due to run out at the end of the month. The funding has been a vital lifeline for our community in Liverpool which, thanks to Liverpool City Council, has an effective local welfare assistance scheme to support people who face destitution. Our region is now faced with tier 3 measures, which makes the funding even more crucial. Will the Chancellor tell the House what discussions he has had with the relevant Secretary of State about extending that essential funding?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman will know that, as a result of Liverpool entering tier 3 restrictions, those conversations have happened with representatives from the Government and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that Liverpool gets the resources it needs to provide extra compliance enforcement and, indeed, extra funding to provide support for businesses and people during what is, I appreciate, a very difficult time for his constituents.

[907823] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Last week, I formally named the e-Voyager in my home village of Millbrook. The e-Voyager is the UK's first seagoing electric ferry and will operate from Cremyll, near Mount Edgumbe country park. Will my right hon. Friend look at investing further in South East Cornwall, where we have this proven expertise?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her work on that important initiative. She is a champion of levelling up in Cornwall and the Government are committed to working with her, which is why among the package of measures of support is included the Cornwall social housing retrofit acceleration and the Cornwall institute for space artificial intelligence. That is part of a suite of measures that will work with the welcome initiative that my hon. Friend has championed.

[907826] **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is noticeable how many Members have raised today the issue of the self-employed and freelancers, such as musicians, actors and dancers, who have had little or no support throughout the pandemic. Rather than suggest that they abandon years of dedication and training, will the Chancellor now consider initiatives such as a universal basic income to protect our valuable arts sector?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): We recognise the concern for the valuable arts sector that the hon. Lady describes, which is why we have put £1.57 billion towards it. As I have said, £330 million of that has been released, and a further release will be made in the next few weeks. That is because we believe in that sector and support those people. Of course, other schemes are already in place—I have highlighted the support for independent production and films, for example—from which those affected can derive benefit.

[907824] **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Con): The events industry and conference sector have been among the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic outbreak and have been told that they will not be assessed until March 2021. Given that they will have an anticipated 15 months with little to no income, will my right hon. Friend advise what support packages are available to support businesses such as Hirex and Exceed in Radcliffe in my constituency?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there are businesses that are experiencing a difficult time, especially in the sectors he mentioned. Our comprehensive set of interventions, whether loans, grants or business rates holidays, will all provide help in different ways, but the most important thing that we can all focus on is suppressing the spread of the virus and unlocking those parts of our economy that are unable to function. That is the surest and only way, in the long run, to protect the jobs that we all care about.

[907825] **Paul Holmes** (Eastleigh) (Con): The Minister or Chancellor will know that tax-free shopping is a major source of income for airports such as Southampton airport in my constituency. With the ongoing problems for the sector caused by covid, that income is even more important, so will the Chancellor or a Minister meet me and representatives from Southampton airport to discuss the continuation of tax-free shopping, which is a valuable lifeline for our struggling aviation industry?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. As someone with an airport in my own constituency, I fully understand the issues. I have had various meetings with many stakeholders and am happy to offer Southampton airport a meeting with Treasury officials to discuss the changes. At the same time as removing tax-free sales from 1 January 2020, the Government are extending duty-free sales to EU-bound passengers for the first time in more than 20 years. That will be a significant boost to regional airports, such as the one in Southampton, which serve significantly more EU than non-EU destinations and have not previously been able to offer duty-free sales to EU-bound passengers.

[907833] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: My constituent, Alex, is a Blue Badge guide. Her income is just above the threshold for the self-employment income support scheme. The money that she has saved to cover her tax bill pushes her over the threshold for universal credit. Despite moving her tours online, Alex is earning very little. Given that the situation looks set to continue, what advice does the Minister have for her and the 3 million other people excluded from the Government's covid-19 financial support?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Lady very much for the concern that she describes. I understand the problem. As she will know, the situation with people on lower income levels who may also be on universal credit is that it is a flexible benefit, which allows the top-up to income received. That is also true with the support received through the support scheme for self-employed people.

[907829] **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): I stand here as a proud ex-coalminer. The mineworkers' pension scheme has done very well over the past 25 years, with successive Governments taking more than £4.5 billion in return for guaranteed payments from the Government. Will my right hon. Friend work with me to ensure that ex-miners and their families get a fairer deal?

Steve Barclay: I know that my hon. Friend has championed this issue and I look forward to further discussions with him on it. He will also know that the Government and the mineworkers' pension scheme have agreed to guarantee the core pension rates in the case of a deficit in the scheme, and have further agreed to protect bonus pensions that have accrued to date. Therefore, clear progress has been made, but I am happy to have further discussions with him.

[907843] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): The covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the income of medical research charities, which could jeopardise progress in discovering new ways of preventing, diagnosing and treating diseases and their risk factors such as air pollution. Given this risk to medical research, what consideration has the Treasury given to the proposal of the Association of Medical Research Charities for a life science charity partnership fund?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady will know that this Government remain absolutely committed to our ambitious plans to double research and development funding over the course of the next few years. We have made enormous

progress on that this year, with a huge and, I think, unprecedented increase in R&D funding that goes not only to basic science research, which she talked about, but ensures that we can develop that research into actionable ideas that benefit people and create jobs. She can rest assured that that remains an important aim of this Government, to ensure that this is the best place in the world in which to research.

[907830] **Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): The Energy Research Accelerator brings together nine midlands research-intensive organisations, including Keele University in my constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme. With its initial Government funding, it secured 23 new research facilities, £120 million of industrial funding and £450 million of total value added in new investment in energy research and development. Will my hon. Friend praise the work that it has done and look favourably on its submissions seeking further funding to build on those successes to deliver on this Government's commitments both to net zero and, of course, to levelling up?

Kemi Badenoch: The Government appreciate the work that the Energy Research Accelerator has been undertaking across the midlands on energy innovation. We have set out our ambition to invest up to £22 billion in R&D by 2024-25. The Chancellor also announced in the spring Budget that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy innovation programme will at least double to £1 billion-plus. R&D investment will continue to have a strong regional impact and benefit areas across the UK, including the midlands.

[907835] **Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Ind): The Chancellor will know that food and drink wholesalers—such as Harvest Fine Foods in my constituency—supply both the hospitality sector, where 70% of sales are made, and the public sector, where the other 30% are made. With the closure and reduction of much of the hospitality sector, and without any targeted Government support, wholesalers are on the verge of collapse, and, with that, the supply of food to institutions such as care homes, prisons, schools and hospitals is at immediate risk. Will he or the Financial Secretary therefore meet the Federation of Wholesale Distributors to discuss the need for business rates relief to be extended to wholesalers to prevent the dire scenario of the public sector finding—

Mr Speaker: Order. Dr Julian Lewis, you know better than to take advantage of me; it is not fair to others. Who wants to answer the question?

Steve Barclay: It is in order to address such pressures that we have set out such a comprehensive package of support that applies universally, including to the businesses to which my right hon. Friend refers. Through his question, he points to another substantive point, which is that suppliers supply to different sectors. One of the challenges with the Opposition's proposals to extend the furlough was that they were never clear which sector they wanted to extend it to. The fact that suppliers supply multiple sectors, including the public sector, is a good illustration of why that proposal is flawed.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The Chancellor will be aware that wholesalers play a fundamental role in the food and drink supply chain,

and, among other things, provide vital resources to our schools, hospitals and care homes; yet many are still struggling and do not have enough Government support. Bidfood, which is based in my Slough constituency, has seen an almost 50% downturn in its sales volumes, and has been forced to make 7% of its workforce redundant. Why has this company been ignored? Given the increased lockdown measures that are proposed, what measures will the Chancellor put in place to support struggling wholesalers—

Mr Speaker: Order. Chancellor, I have cut the hon. Gentleman short. I have done you a favour; now, do not take advantage.

Rishi Sunak: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Obviously, the hon. Gentleman raises a similar point to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis)—in a co-ordinated attack. Such businesses have not been ignored. I appreciate that they are treated slightly differently from the hospitality businesses which they serve, but,

for the reasons that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury set out, it is tricky when there are businesses involved in the supply chain. The hon. Gentleman talked specifically about the business in his constituency facing reduced demand. The job support scheme is specifically there for businesses that are open but facing a reduced demand. That will allow them, rather than making redundancies, to receive a wage subsidy from the Government to help top up those employees' wages. I hope that the company will look at that.

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.

12.31 pm

Sitting suspended.

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

Equal Pay (Information and Claims)

Motion for leave to introduce a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.35 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to introduce a Bill to make provision for a right for employees to obtain information relating to the pay of a comparator; to reform remedies and time limits relating to equal pay; to provide a right to equal pay where a single source can rectify unequal pay; to amend the statutory statement of particulars to include equal pay; to provide for requirements on certain employers to publish information about the differences in pay between male and female employees and between employees of different ethnic origins; and for connected purposes.

Members could be forgiven for thinking that we have been here before, because women have been asking for equal pay since 1833. The first recorded instance was in Robert Owen's labour exchange. I am sorry to say, as a Co-op MP, that it was not answered positively—I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) would feel the same. One hundred and eighty-eight years later, we are still waiting. Last year alone, 30,000 equal pay claims were made at tribunal, and this year we have seen that the gender pay gap is increasing, not closing. That means that, in 2020, nine out of 10 women in this country work in companies or organisations that pay them less on average than their male counterparts.

I want to start by nailing the myth that it is the fault of the women themselves. It is not because they have kids or because they do not ask for pay rises. The evidence is crystal clear. Absolutely, there is a pay penalty for having a kid—I think we are all beginning to realise that—but it was there before the children were born. The evidence is also clear that women ask just as often as men for a pay rise, but men are four times more likely to receive it. The research shows that the impact of the gender pay gap comes from a mixture of things, including working for less productive companies, wanting to work part time, and good, old-fashioned discrimination. Even being a graduate does not help, as the pay gap begins early in many women's careers.

We all miss out as a result of those inequalities. The Bank of England forecasts that ending the gender pay gap would add £600 billion to our economy by 2025, and ending discrimination against those from black and ethnic minority backgrounds in the workplace, as this Bill seeks to do, would add £24 billion a year to our GDP. Given that we are now facing an economic crisis, there has never been a better time finally to grapple with why, even in 2020, not everybody gets an equal day's pay for an equal day's work.

It is not as if women have not tried to act through the centuries. Following the impact of the Dagenham Ford strikers, Barbara Castle's legendary Equal Pay Act 1970 was passed before I was even born. The subsequent film, "Made in Dagenham", may have won awards, but an equal pay award in this country is often much harder to come by, because it requires legal action.

Pay discrimination is prevalent because it is hard to get pay transparency. Unless a woman knows that a man who is doing equal work to her is being paid more, she cannot know whether she is being paid equally. At

present, getting that information all too often requires going to court because it is not available. Equal pay tribunals make up 12% of employment claims in this country, but 40% of claimants settle because it is more stressful to continue and a third withdraw their cases due to cost. Only 41% of claimants are legally represented at the tribunals. Little wonder that many companies have a "don't ask, don't tell" approach and never analyse the pay in the company or the pay gap for fear of generating the information that might assist a claim in the first place.

That strategy works. As the Fawcett Society, which is working on this Bill, points out, six in 10 working women do not know whether they are being paid less than a male counterpart, and only three in 10 agreed that their employer would be honest with them and tell them if they were. Little wonder that some major household names, from the BBC to Tesco and Asda, have dragged their heels on these issues, making legal action the only option for women. That is why I pay tribute to women such as Carrie Gracie and Samira Ahmed, who have been prepared to stick their neck out on this, because it is really difficult to do so.

When I introduced this Bill, one woman wrote to me—hon. Members will understand why this is an anonymous case study—"In my previous role, I hired two junior staff members within six months of each other: one male, one female, both the same age, the same pedigree, the same salary expectations, hired to do the same role, sitting side by side. When I sought sign-off from my male boss to pay the female candidate the same salary, I was asked to offer her a starting salary at the bottom of the salary range. They told me in the business they pay people the least they think they can get away with, and they think she will accept less." When the woman challenged that behaviour and pointed out the equal pay disparity, and that it could lead to a tribunal, she found her own career stymied. The promotion that she had been promised was denied to her because she was told that she had been too pushy on equal pay.

The Bill is about righting those wrongs. It has been drafted by a panel of legal and human resources experts, chaired by the amazing Daphne Romney QC. It seeks to break the culture of discrimination and the culture of secrecy that causes it. I pay tribute to Baroness Margaret Prosser, who has led this work in the other place and is a fearless champion of equal pay. The Bill implements a right to know, to give women the right to request the pay data of their male counterparts. If they suspect that an individual or group may constitute a comparator, they would have a right to know that information so that they could make the comparison without having to go to court and make a formal request. This is something that is supported by the British public. A new poll from Savanta shows that 62% of people think that if a woman is not paid equally for doing the same job as a man, she should be given the information so that she can challenge the situation.

The Bill is not just about equal pay. Women of colour, for too long, have been left out of the conversation about equality in the workplace. Without examining both race and gender we fail to understand the intersectionality of pay discrimination. The Bank of England estimates that the black and ethnic-minority pay gap is 10%. It has narrowed even less than the gender pay gap in the past 25 years, and is 25% in

London. Restoring gender pay-gap reporting and expanding the principle to ethnicity pay-gap reporting will help to open up action on the barriers that mean that talent is denied throughout businesses and the public sector.

The Government said that they would act on the ethnicity pay gap, but action has not been forthcoming. Indeed, it is troubling that in the pandemic the only bit of business reporting and accountability that the Government said that businesses did not need to undertake was gender pay-gap reporting. What happens when we remove that focus on tackling inequality in the workplace? Two weeks after this year's deadline, having been told that they did not have to do it, 10,000 eligible companies had not submitted their figures.

When we look at the figures, we see that the gap has increased. If we continue just to ask nicely, nothing will happen and our economy will miss out as a result. The Minister for Equalities told me that she wanted more data before she improved the way we did gender pay-gap reporting and ethnicity reporting, but if we are not even asking for that, we will never get anywhere on this.

Addressing this inequality could not be more timely. A survey by Pregnant Then Screwed shows that it was mainly mothers who faced redundancy and inequality in the workplace in the pandemic, partly because they could not secure childcare so that they could go back to work. As early as May, a study by PwC showed that 78% of people who had lost their job during the pandemic were women. Axing the gender pay-gap reporting process sends the message that that does not matter, but it should matter to all of us, because of the impact on our economy and society.

For nearly 200 years, women have been asking for parity, and with the pandemic bearing down on us, we cannot afford to wait any longer for action. I may be signing my own political death warrant if history is anything to go by in raising these issues. Like the anonymous case study that I cited, the history on this is not good. In contrast to that film, the strikers in 1968 were not looking for equal pay—they had been unjustly graded at work—and they did not get equal pay; they received 92% of the pay received by their male counterparts. The resulting investigation and fury from raising the issue led to the Equal Pay Act 1970—at the cost of Barbara Castle's career. We should never forget to pay

tribute to her. Despite opposition from those in the Labour Government at the time to amendments on equal pay, she stuck her neck out for other women and forced that Bill through, but she was lost from the Cabinet as a result, prompting her to tell a sponsor of the Bill—and another legend when it comes to fighting for women's rights—my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), “remember all Labour Prime Ministers are bastards”.

I hope that that will not be true, and I certainly hope that the Prime Minister will not fall into that type. My right hon. and learned Friend has made the case that this is a pro-business measure—we should all support it—which is why I am proud that it has support across the House.

That is not enough. The Minister needs to say, “Deeds not Words.” In 50 years, I hope that we have moved towards recognising that Barbara Castle was right. That discrimination is bad not just for those affected—it is bad for businesses and the economy as well. The measure now needs political will, so that we make sure that equal pay is not just a great fiction but a lived reality for everyone in this country.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have been given no indication that anybody intends to oppose the hon. Lady.

Stella Creasy: Quite right, too!

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Stella Creasy, Caroline Nokes, Neil Gray, Nadia Whittome, Chris Bryant, Florence Eshalomi, Anne McLaughlin, Chris Evans, Bell Ribeiro-Addy, Christine Jardine, Caroline Lucas and Ms Harriet Harman present the Bill.

Stella Creasy accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read the Second time on Friday 13 November and to be printed (Bill 199).

Mr Deputy Speaker: Barbara Castle was an absolute giant of a politician. I spoke to her often. I have happy memories of Barbara Castle.

Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) (No. 2) Bill

Considered in Committee

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans): I should explain that in these exceptional circumstances, although the Chair of the Committee would normally sit in the Clerk's chair during Committee stages, 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. Therefore, I and whoever else occupies the Chair should be referred as Chairs and not as Deputy Speakers.

Clause 1

COMPILATION OF RATING LISTS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Second Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider clause 2 stand part.

12.46 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): One can tell by the enormous crowd in the Chamber that the NDR Bill is going to be the highlight of this parliamentary week. Nevertheless, given that the average local authority delivers over 800 different services which, during this covid crisis, are being brought into sharp focus as to how essential they are as part of the warp and weft of our communities, it is important that we get this right.

This matter has been extensively debated previously, and it is largely of a technical nature. However, I would be pleased to hear the Minister address a point about the timing that has emerged during the Bill's passage through the House. Among those 800 different services, local authorities provide the billing process to local businesses to ensure that business rates are both accurate and able to be paid on time. It is absolutely critical that they have sufficient time within that process to receive the data from the Valuation Office Agency, to test that with the software supplier who ensures that the bills are physically dispatched to businesses, to resolve any disputes that may subsequently emerge—it is not uncommon for businesses to come back with queries—and then to be in a position to ensure that payment is made in a timely manner.

I entirely understand why, from a Government perspective, it is important to align that process with a fiscal event, which is likely to be an autumn Budget. However, as we have seen, especially in these recent times, there is often a situation whereby the timing of those events needs to move around and change. I hope that the Minister will be able to address the need to ensure that this information is available to local authorities in a timely manner so that businesses have certainty and accuracy regarding these bills. I would like an assurance that if there is a need to change the date of the autumn Budget, there will then be scope within the timetable to provide the information to local authorities, prior to the Budget taking place, to ensure that the bills are available

to local businesses in a timely manner, and, indeed, can be paid, so as to be part of the critical funding arrangements for local authorities.

With those observations, I take my seat and look forward to hearing the furious and enthusiastically engaged debate that will doubtless follow.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): This is not a controversial measure, as the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) has made clear, but I want to put a few points on the record while confirming that the Opposition continue to support the proposals.

Since Second Reading, there have been at least a couple of developments. The first is that the rate of covid infection is rising again, and that makes the case for supporting businesses and local authorities, including through business rate reform, even stronger. The second is that organisations with an interest in this Bill have made it even clearer in conversations with us that although they support the Bill, they are looking for yet more meaningful change. The Bill must be the beginning of root-and-branch reform of the business rate system. Right now, the jobs of people in the arts, retail, hospitality and many other sectors are under threat from the economic impact of the covid-19 pandemic. Those sectors and others need help to get through the rising wave of infections, and they need that help as urgently as possible.

Business rates, as currently set up, do not fairly reflect the rental value of the premises occupied, and they have created regional imbalances. A further and growing unfairness is that retailers that occupy shops in high streets pay far more in tax than online retailers do—that situation is, disappointingly, incentivising the decline of our high streets. Research by Revo shows just how acute the regional imbalance can be. In the north and the midlands, the rate rise is almost 12.5 times greater than the rise in rental values, compared with just four times greater in the south. If the Government are serious about levelling up, they need to address that anomaly.

Getting the business rate system right is essential, and it should be seen as part of the support that the Government must provide to businesses and local authorities to help the economy to recover fully. The Government have been too slow to support businesses and local authorities during the pandemic. According to the Local Government Association, the Government have left councils facing a £3 billion funding gap, which means that support for local economic recovery may be cut precisely when it is needed most.

The country is facing a long, hard winter ahead as we contend with the effects of covid-19, and we must provide all the support we can to local authorities and local businesses to get our communities through this safely.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I know that the Bill is to do with England and Wales, but given that we face potentially the greatest recession that we have had in our lifetimes, there is a need for flexibility in non-domestic rating. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that with the Bill, the Government have given us the flexibility to respond to whatever the future may give us?

Steve Reed: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the need for flexibility. The situation ahead is very unpredictable and uncertain, and we need the

flexibility to support businesses and local economies, whatever circumstances we find ourselves in in a few weeks' or months' time.

On Second Reading, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) asked the Minister a question that has not yet been answered, so I politely invite him to respond to it today. Given that the Valuation Office Agency has a backlog of 50,000 appeals, some dating back as far as 2010, will he share with the House what conversations he has had with the Treasury about how that backlog will be tackled? Because of the pending appeals, councils, which are responsible for collecting business rates on behalf of the Government, have had to divert more than £3 billion away from frontline services. That figure is very close to the in-year funding gap that is leading to cuts in frontline services across the country, as the second wave of infection rises and the economy slips into recession. What a difference that funding would make, if the Government would only make it available to local authorities and public services on the frontline.

Fixing the business rates system is essential if our high streets are to survive, but the Government must also recognise the key role that local government will play in driving local economic recovery. The Government's broken promises on council funding will restrict town halls' ability to support struggling local businesses. I am sure I do not need to remind the Minister just how important local authorities have been throughout the pandemic, and that is why it is so important that they are supported financially. Councils have lost £953 million from business rates income between March and July this year alone, according to the Local Government Association, and that accounts for more than a quarter of all income losses for councils over that period.

The Opposition welcome the measures in the Bill, but only as a first step in the much wider reform that is needed to create a level playing field for businesses and to support our high streets to recover.

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): I thank the shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed), and my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) for their contributions.

We are now familiar with the two improvements that the Bill makes to the business rates system. It moves the date for implementation of the next revaluation in England and Wales to 1 April 2023, and it moves the latest date by which draft rateable values must be prepared in England and Wales to 31 December preceding the revaluation. Both changes can be found in clause 1. Clause 2 simply sets the extent and name of the legislation.

In order to understand clause 1, we first need to consider the main primary legislation for business rates, which is the Local Government Finance Act 1988. All of clause 1 is concerned with amendments to the 1988 Act. Part III of that Act concerns business rates, and it currently requires revaluations in England and Wales to take place every five years from 1 April 2017. Therefore, without amendment to the current law, it would require revaluation to take place in England and Wales on 1 April 2022. The Bill changes that date in a straightforward way by amending the 1988 Act to instead provide for the next revaluation in England and Wales to be on 1 April 2023. It does that both for local rating lists and

for central rating lists held by my Department and the Welsh Government. Central lists contain large network properties, such as the electricity supply companies.

We can see the change in the Bill—clause 1(2)(a) adds the words “on 1 April 2023”; clause 1(3)(a) makes the change for England and clause 1(4) does so for Wales. The change to the timing of the draft rating list from no later than the 30 September to 31 December can be seen in equally simple terms in clause 1(2)(b) for local rating lists and clause 1(3)(b) for central rating lists.

That date is the deadline—the latest date by when draft rateable values must be prepared. The Bill will still allow the Valuation Office Agency to publish rateable values earlier than the end of December. We fully intend to give ratepayers as much notice as possible of their draft rateable values, the new multipliers and any transitional arrangements that might be included. Historically, these have been confirmed at the time of the autumn fiscal event, so ratepayers will continue to have several months to pay their bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner raised a point about fiscal events and what might happen in different instances. It is worth putting on the record that it is required within law that the multipliers are produced as part of the local government finance settlement, but we are of course cognisant of the fact that a date in February would be too late. I restate our intention to make sure that they are provided earlier than that—in good time—if events transpire as my hon. Friend described.

Moving the date of the draft rating list also has implications for local government, which has a share in business rates income through the business rates retention scheme. On that point, I assure the Committee that my Department has held discussions with representatives of local government, including the Local Government Association. We intend to make any adjustments as are necessary to the rates retention scheme to ensure that locally retained income is, as far as practicable, unaffected by the revaluation. That will give councils the assurances they need over locally retained rates income. In the revaluation, we will also ensure that local government will have what it needs to issue the new bills in a timely way.

The hon. Member for Croydon North raised an important point about VOA appeals and was quite right to do so. It is worth saying that the new business rates appeals system introduced in 2017 is operating smoothly and ratepayers have been able to make appeals throughout this difficult period. The large volume of appeals under the previous list system showed why the system was in need of reform, with large numbers of speculative appeals clogging up the system and over 70% of appeals leading to no change. The VOA recently delivered some key improvements to the system, addressing specific concerns from stakeholders, including new features frequently requested by customers and agents to make the system easier to use.

The hon. Member for Croydon North is right to highlight that there are still some outstanding cases from 2010. The majority of those cases have been held up by litigation pending the outcome of a Supreme Court case concerning the rateability of ATMs. The Supreme Court issued a decision on the matter on 20 May this year, and the outstanding cases are now

[*Luke Hall*]

being settled. The VOA is engaging with stakeholders and has agreed a timetable to deal with these cases, and I will keep it under close review. He is right to raise that.

1 pm

David Simmonds: Does my hon. Friend agree that, when it comes to the Valuation Office Agency, there is a need to recognise that some business rates appeals concern very significant amounts of money—so significant in some cases that they can imperil the financial viability of a local authority? We can cast our minds back to the circumstances of West Somerset District Council, with which I had some involvement in my time at the Local Government Association. The business rates appeal relating to the nuclear power station in that area, which was the main source of business rates for the local authority, was so big that local government reorganisation was the only solution to make the delivery of local government services in that area viable. In my area, Heathrow airport is the biggest single source of business rate payments, and changes in those payments can lead to significant in-year variations in business rates. Can he give me some assurance that his Department is focused on making clear to the VOA the importance of processing these appeals in a timely manner and giving sufficient scope for local authorities to manage the impact?

Luke Hall: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is entirely right to highlight some of the challenges, and I can give him that assurance. The fundamental review of business rates is considering a number of issues, including the frequency of future revaluations. He is right to make that important point.

I am afraid I cannot agree with the hon. Member for Croydon North about local government funding. We have had exchanges on that important point, and we have different views. The Prime Minister announced last week an extra £1 billion of funding for local government. I am aware of the need for certainty, and we plan to explain the distribution of that funding as quickly as we can. The £4.8 billion that has been provided to local government, including £3.7 billion of un-ring-fenced funding, has been a big support to councils, which are doing an incredible job up and down the country and delivering first-class public services in an extremely difficult and challenging environment.

David Simmonds: Does the Minister recognise that the complexity of local government finance is a huge part of addressing public concerns? A top-tier authority such as a London borough will have responsibility for a parking revenue account and a housing revenue account, and it will have business rates income and council tax income. Over and above that, it will expect to see regular income from fees and charges for services that it provides to the public on a traded basis. Although some of that is captured by the core spending power measure, which is usually used by his Department as the critical way to explain the financial position of local authorities specifically and the local government sector in general, does he agree that that could be improved, so that Members and our constituents could grasp in a little more detail the impact that these changes have in their town hall or civic centre?

Luke Hall: My hon. Friend makes a fair point about the need for clarity of message about the spending power of councils, and I am happy to continue conversations with him about how we can look at that. We believe that core spending power remains the most accurate available method to discuss local government finance. That is why we use it when highlighting, for instance, the 4.4% real-terms increase in local government finance this year as part of the local government finance settlement. I thank him for that intervention. He is absolutely right to put that on the record.

We are trying to give councils the tools they need to ensure that they can implement this revaluation, cognisant of the need to provide clarity as part of a fiscal spending event. I restate the point that if that was not possible, we would follow our obligations.

David Simmonds: Will my hon. Friend give some consideration to updating the list, which was originally conceived in the days of Lord Pickles when he was Secretary of State at the Ministry? He sought to gather best practice from across the local government sector. While we recognise that the reduction in the cost of biscuits at meetings was not going to bridge any budget gaps, many in the sector—I pay particular tribute to Sir Ray Puddifoot, the leader of Hillingdon, who has just announced his retirement—are masters of the art of looking at different ways to maximise local authority income within the framework provided by the Ministry, to provide the greatest possible consistency and financial stability to their local authority.

Luke Hall: My hon. Friend makes a hugely important point, and it is probably one that could be looked at in the even wider context of sharing good practice by local authorities that are doing such an incredible job. That is why we have tried to ensure, in the support we have tried to give councils during the pandemic, that they have the tools and ability to share best practice. We also facilitate that through my Department and our Government, whether that is the Brexit delivery board, for instance, or any of the other vehicles that we use to share good practice.

I put on record my thanks and appreciation to council representatives, groups and the sector as a whole for their role in sharing and providing good practice. The Local Government Association does an incredible job of bringing that type of guidance and support together and ensuring that there are good forums for councils to meet and discuss a wide range of issues, including the one that my hon. Friend rightly highlights on council funding and finances.

We know that it has been a challenging time for councils throughout this pandemic, but that is why we have distributed the funding in the way that we have, working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care. We are cognisant of the pressures still faced by local authorities, which is why our income scheme, the infection control fund and others have been so important to supporting local authorities throughout this pandemic.

We believe that this is a small but important Bill. We are extremely grateful for the support of Members across the House. We believe it is a common-sense solution to the problem faced by councils. I take on board the wider points about business rates that Members have raised today, and I therefore highlight the wider

review of business rates that is being conducted. I am always willing to take further representations about the importance of that review. This is a common-sense Bill, and I am grateful for the support of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly 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.

Third Reading

1.9 pm

Luke Hall: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Although small, this Bill delivers on an important commitment that is vital for ensuring a fair outcome for ratepayers, and I am glad it has been accepted by all Members across the House. I am grateful for the contributions of Members both on Second Reading and in Committee. I would certainly like to put on record my thanks to them for their support of the Bill. I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed), and to the hon. Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern), who has done a lot of work on the Bill and will know it backwards by the end of its passage. Finally, I put on record my thanks to the Clerks and the excellent civil servants in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for helping to steer this legislation through the House. This is an important Bill that represents just one part of the Government support provided to business across this country, and I commend it to the House.

1.10 pm

Steve Reed: I will not rehearse my points on the wider issues of local government finance where there is disagreement across the Benches; that is all on the record. I will just welcome this Bill and the changes that it proposes to the system. They are needed, but as has been accepted on all sides, they cannot be a substitute for the much wider changes that will be required to support our high streets through some very difficult times in the months and years to come. In particular, we need to focus on how we support bricks-and-mortar retailers to compete on a level playing field with online retailers if we want our towns, high streets and districts not just to survive, but to thrive long into the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Third time and passed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): In order for everybody to leave the Chamber safely and for the main players in the next debate to take their positions, we will suspend the sitting for a relatively brief period. If it is possible to have the Dispatch Boxes sanitised as well, I would be very grateful.

1.12 pm

Sitting suspended.

Backbench Business

Black History Month

[Relevant documents: e-petition 324092, entitled Teach Britain's colonial past as part of the UK's compulsory curriculum; e-petition 323808, entitled Add education on diversity and racism to all school curriculums; and e-petition 323961, entitled Making the UK education curriculum more inclusive of BAME history.]

1.17 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Black History Month.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to discuss this important issue today, and I thank Members on both sides of the House for their support in securing the debate. Specifically, I would like to thank the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). I also thank the shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for her commitment to addressing this issue. I am pleased that there was cross-party support for this debate to take place during Black History Month.

My sincere thanks go to Akyaaba Addai-Sebo, a co-ordinator of special projects for the Greater London Council in 1987, who organised the first recognition of this month. It must have taken extraordinary courage to speak out against racism and discrimination in order to pave the way for me and others.

Black History Month is about celebrating and highlighting black heroes, such as Petronella Breinburg, one of the first black female authors in Britain to write a children's book with a black protagonist; Dr Harold Moody, a Jamaican-born physician who emigrated to the United Kingdom, where he campaigned against racial prejudice and established the League of Coloured Peoples in 1931; Mary Prince, a British abolitionist, who was the first black woman to write an autobiography and present an anti-slavery petition; Asquith Camile Xavier, a West Indian-born Briton who ended the colour bar at British Rail in London by fighting to become the first non-white train guard at Euston station in 1966; David Pitt, the second peer of African descent to sit in the House of Lords; Dr Erinma Bell, a community peace activist, and Yomi Mambu, the first black person to hold the title of Lord Mayor in England.

But I must also mention the trailblazers who came before us in this place: Lord Boateng, Bernie Grant, Baroness Amos and, of course, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington. Their legacy in the House can be seen throughout the Chamber today.

We celebrate all those trailblazers not just because they are black individuals, but because they are great Britons, and not just because they are great black Britons but because they are great Britons in Black History Month. We truly celebrate them, because everyone

[Abena Oppong-Asare]

benefits from recognising the important contributions they make in laying pathways for others who look like them and follow in their footsteps. This is what this debate is about, and this is why I came into this place: to speak for those who barely get a voice in this society.

When we look at many aspects of society, including the jewel in our national crown, the NHS, we see that we are overly represented in the workforce, although, sadly, not at the top. Black, Asian and minority ethnic people are far more likely to work in key worker roles, and those workers are more likely to be pressured to work in dangerous circumstances. In the NHS, 63% of BAME doctors reported that they had been pressured to work in wards with covid patients, compared with 32% of their white counterparts.

These examples of institutional discrimination have destroyed the lives of black people across the UK. I know of one nurse in my constituency who unfortunately lost her life to covid-19, leaving behind a heartbroken family. After hearing claims of racial discrimination in the workplace and seeing research pointing to long-term structural racism as a factor in the disproportionate covid deaths, I have to question how many lives might have been needlessly lost due to the lack of action on tackling racism over the past decade. Today, when we talk about Black History Month as a celebration, we should also reflect on the persistent racial inequalities that this Government must address as a matter of immediate concern. This is an opportunity to speak on behalf of all those voices in society that we celebrate this month.

Black people have faced discrimination in the UK for as long as history can remember, but racism is not a thing of the past. I am sad to have to stand here and describe how discrimination has continued into the present. Its impact is still felt on so many lives: black women are five times more likely to die in pregnancy; black Caribbean children are three times more likely to be excluded from school; black workers with degrees earn almost a quarter less than their counterparts; black people make up just 3% of the UK population but 12% of those in prison. Why is it that year on year these statistics are read out in a debate or in news and no action is taken? That it is still necessary in 2020 for young people to take to the streets to remind us that black lives matter should bring shame on us all. Black lives matter; we are in this House and we must recognise that.

I have two asks of the Government and I want them to give me a direct answer today. The first is to implement a race equality strategy and action plan that will cover areas such as education, health and employment, something that Operation Black Vote has called for. The second is to set up a taskforce that will look to diversify the curriculum—to really diversify the curriculum. We want all our kids—all our children, black and white, in every single corner of this country—to better understand our history, so that our children have a true sense of belonging within British culture and British history, because at the moment it does not reflect that.

Teach First reported that the biggest exam board does not include a single book by a black author in English literature specifications, and 75% of English teachers have concerns about the lack of ethnic diversity

in the curriculum. Let me break that down: that means pupils can complete their GCSEs and leave secondary school without having studied a single literary work by a non-white author. If we have a better understanding of our history, everyone is better off. It also means that we will not make the same mistakes as we did with the Windrush scandal. It will help us better to know ourselves and how this country got to this place, and what work still needs to be done.

That is why I am saying to the Government now that we need a race equality strategy because, as furlough ends, the redundancies will be coming hard and fast. If we do nothing again, once again, black communities will suffer. In education, we cannot leave a generation behind with this digital divide, and in health, as the pandemic wreaks havoc, we are dying in great numbers. An educational taskforce will look at our curriculum honestly, ensuring that the books our children read, learn from and develop from have a clearer analysis of our history—the good, the bad and the ugly—and the values they can take to become future leaders. It is this grounding that will ensure that all our children, black and white, will have the opportunity to fulfil their full potential. We need to get the curriculum right, so that we have more black teachers and so that more people from diverse backgrounds will get to the top, which will mean a fairer playing field—not one that locks the privileged in and the disadvantaged out.

The past year has been deeply traumatic for black people, who have failed to be supported by the Government. I have called on the House today to do more to tackle racism, but we can all do more to be active in the future, so I say to my fellow black brothers and sisters: if you are watching today, if you do one thing, make sure you register to vote so that in the local elections, mayoral elections and the general election, you can have your say and make your voice heard.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As hon. Members can see, the call list is quite extensive but I do not intend to put a time limit on initially. However, if Members go on way beyond five or six minutes, they will either be knocking people off at the other end or reducing the time that they have, so please be mindful of other Members who will want to make contributions later.

1.26 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I am delighted to be speaking in this debate during Black History Month, as the first black Conservative MP on these Benches in 2005. It is great to look around the Chamber today, on both sides, because the complexion is new. Certainly on the Government Benches, every one of us is here based on hard work, merit and, yes, of course, a little bit of luck from time to time.

When I was growing up in a single-parent household in south-east London, racism was pretty crude. It was in your face. It was insults, casual violence, and it was very direct and very physical, including being spat at on buses and all sorts of things. I never dreamt, back in those days, that there would be any opportunity to get to the law-making apparatus of our entire nation. What an amazing thing to achieve—I am sure that everyone here of any background and persuasion feels exactly the same, especially if they came from a challenging background.

The beauty of this Chamber and the strength of our United Kingdom is its rich diversity. Our country and our Parliament have demonstrated the ability to evolve, adapt and integrate good people who share our values and aspirations. It also demonstrates that we reject beliefs and practices that run counter to our values and those that seek to undermine democracy, freedom of speech and the rule of law. But British history is long and diverse, and it is undeniable—Magna Carta, democracy, the agrarian and industrial revolutions, the uniting of our kingdom, free trade, the abolition of slavery, emancipation, the defeat of Hitler and fascism, freedom of speech and plurality of media, and, in recent days, thank goodness, race relations and equal opportunities.

The constitution of our country consists of waves of people coming and going over millennia—Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Normans, Flemings, Huguenots, Indians, Kenyans, Russians, and, in more recent times, Americans, Australians and—soon—Hong Kong Chinese. Let us face it: at some point in the past 12,000 years, every one of our ancestors was an immigrant to these islands. If anyone is daring enough to take a DNA test, they might make some interesting discoveries. They might discover that, actually, we are all related. If we go back 70,000 years, we discover that modern human beings are all from the same stock. Black history is as rich and varied a part of our history as Asian, Jewish, Chinese and Mediterranean history, and the history of sex, gender, sexual preference, disability and class. I am delighted to see that the contribution of non-white Brits is increasingly recognised across society, and Black History Month is a good opportunity to make those recognitions.

We cannot erase uncomfortable parts of our history, but we can learn from them. As a former governor of the Museum of London, I am deeply conscious of the many and varied histories that run through the streets of London and flow through the veins of our nation, and it is important that these contributions and historical interactions between people across the globe are acknowledged in the teaching of history and culture. As every teacher will know, timetables are tight, so this is a good time to reflect on whether we have the right balance of lessons in the context of our history and of the composition of present day Britain. History should not be whitewashed, but it should also not be blackwashed. Acknowledging black histories in schools should not crowd out other histories but highlight the rich diversity of all the histories that we share.

So I add a little note of caution: it is all too easy to say that a single characteristic, such as skin colour, eclipses and overshadows everything else. It is all too easy to fall for the dangerous identity politics, where individuals are kettled into stereotypical communities, often for the benefit of self-appointed spokesmen and leaders. It is all too easy to focus on difference to generate a sense of grievance for political gain—I think we all recognise that—but I believe that what unites us as British citizens is far greater than what divides. So for me, Black History Month is a good time for reflection. I want us to live in a country where a person

“will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character”,

and that goal is very much more within our reach than it was when I was a child in the '60s and '70s. For me, black history is not about segregating communities or about the racist, dehumanising, infantilising politics of identity; it is about recognising different histories and

embracing our common humanity as equal citizens today. With a solid adherence to our values, our culture will continue its subtle evolution. Consensual integration will arise on the gentle currents of myriad individual free choices.

So let us celebrate the rich and evolving nature of our great nation. Let us celebrate those people of various heritages who have made it in mainstream life in Britain—including many of us in this Chamber today. Let us not forget where we were before the '70s and Bernie Grant. Before we made our changes here, this Chamber had a very different complexion. We have made huge advances. We have non-white people at the top of science, at the top of the media and at the top of scientific academies; we have the editor of *Vogue*. There are so many good examples—[HON. MEMBERS: “The Minister!”] And the Minister—forgive me! We have so many examples of how far we have come, but I acknowledge that there is still further to go. Let us celebrate the rich and evolving nature of our great nation: one nation awash with difference but united on the foundations of democracy, free speech and equality under the law.

1.33 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this debate today, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie). He said that if we were to take a DNA test, we might find that we were related. Well, I can tell him that all of us in the world share 99.9% of our DNA.

I would like to start with a quote: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.” Every year, I set a theme for my Black History Month, and this year my theme is allies. I thank all the allies around the world and the country who have joined Black Lives Matter marches, who have decided that they will be anti-racist, not just not racist, and who have made a consistent effort to fight the good fight, whether they are black, white or brown. What we have in common is that we are fighting for justice.

The pandemic has shone a light on many injustices that exist in the world. I hope that the Government will ensure that they follow the data when they allocate investment and funds. Too often, in areas such as Brent, a disproportionate amount of cuts leads to bad housing, fewer services and more deaths when it comes to covid-19.

I am passionate about history and how history is taught in our country. At the moment, history is taught to make one group of people feel inferior and another group of people feel superior, which has to stop. We need to look at history and improve it. Labour's Emancipation Educational Trust is vital and a long overdue investment. Part of the solution is recognising the role that each of us plays in each other's life and understanding that progress should mean not the destruction or dehumanisation of another person, but an understanding of each other.

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): Could the hon. Lady expand on which parts of the curriculum she believes make black children feel inferior?

Dawn Butler: History needs to be decolonised. My hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead has already discussed how people can go through the

[Dawn Butler]

whole of their GCSE and not hear reference to any black authors. They can go through history thinking that the people who were enslaved were not part of the uprising, without understanding the richness of Africa and the Caribbean, and without understanding all the leaders in the black community. I am surprised that the Minister has asked me that because it is so well documented that history needs to be decolonised. If we look at organisations such as the Runnymede Trust, it is absolutely amazing.

Kemi Badenoch: I will address the issues around decolonising the curriculum at the end of my speech, but the hon. Lady will acknowledge that, even though there may not be enough black authors, there are other racial groups, such as Chinese, Asian and so on, who we do not believe are inferior. So if it is just the number of people who look like you who have written books that is making you inferior, why are black children different from all those other racial groups?

Dawn Butler: There is no other group where people have been systematically stripped of their humanity throughout history, where colonisation has meant that people have gone to their country, captured them and taken them by force to another country, where they have been raped and thrown overboard in the sea. There is no other group that that has happened to. I am going to explain in my speech why it is so important that history is taught in its fullness. If the Minister takes the time to listen, I think I might just teach her a little something.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): The hon. Lady mentioned that no other group in history has been singled out and dehumanised in the way that she has outlined. Without question, such activities are repugnant to all of us. However, we should not exceptionalise Africans or people of African descent. Sadly, slavery has been endemic in virtually all societies. As recently as the 19th century, Barbary pirates from north Africa enslaved more than 1,300 Cornishmen and women and subjugated them to slavery. We find it in China, the Indian subcontinent and the Americas, such as in south America with the Aztecs, Incas and so on. It is a beastly ghastly thing that we must categorically condemn for all people. Does she agree that there is no exclusive nature, as she was suggesting?

Dawn Butler: I pause, Mr Deputy Speaker, because whenever there is a discussion about black history and an enslavement that lasted for decades and was built on the economy, which is very different from any other type of enslavement, people always try to compare one form of slavery with another. Sometimes, especially during Black History Month, it would be progress if one could just acknowledge the inhumanity that happened and the systemic racism that not only existed then but has a lasting legacy now in our structures, which it does not for any other group.

This is a dark time for our history and if we do not stand up to racists now, it will get worse. We need only open the paper and look on social media to see the racist abuse. We know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) gets more racist abuse than all the MPs in

this place put together. People, including myself, are subjected to vile threats every day; somebody who threatened to kill me was jailed. People are being attacked in the streets, and hate crime is rising. People have been raped and beaten up just because they have a different point of view, skin colour or religion, or even just because of who they love.

This is why the teaching of history is so important—in its complete form, not with these rose-tinted glasses that say that white is supreme to any other group. When the plot to murder Labour MP Rosie Cooper was foiled, the judge said—and this is important—that the criminal had a

“perverted view of history and current politics”.

The Crown Prosecution Service said that he was

“prepared to act on his white supremacist world view and plotted to kill a Member of Parliament”.

This person also said horrendous things about Jewish people. This neo-Nazi has been sentenced to life imprisonment. We stand here with Jo Cox’s plaque on the wall, and her murderer had far-right extremist views. He also thought that Jo was just too kind a person—he was probably right there; she was. He was also sentenced to life imprisonment. The person who tried to kill the Mayor of London and my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) had a perverted view of history and white supremacy. This is why it is important that history is taught in a balanced way and you do not ignore the reality of what is happening just to make a political point. This is why the teaching of a decolonised history and the inclusion of black history is so important.

I have often delivered learning and development courses, where I have accumulated three top responses when people have been told that they are racist. If someone has been accused of racism or they have been racist, that does not mean they have to stay a racist for their entire life—they can change and educate themselves. These are the top three reactions, besides some of the stuff we have heard today, when people compare, contrast or try to explain it all away. This is how people respond: first, “I don’t see colour.” The goal is not for people not to see colour; we do not want people to be colour blind. If people do not see colour, the likelihood is that they will not see the discrimination that comes off the back of it. We need the acknowledgement, and we need people to be non-judgmental when they see colour, not to prejudge someone because of the colour of their skin. We need people not to be colour blind.

The second is, “I haven’t got a racist bone in my body.” Technically, that is probably correct because racism does not exist in the bones—it is in the mind. Racism is taught. Race is a social construct. It was created so that a group of people can be dehumanised because of the colour of their skin. Racism, however, is very real and very dangerous. The third, which I have heard time and time again, is, “I have a black friend.” Having a black friend does not excuse racism. In fact, this is not Monopoly. Having a black friend is not a “get out of racist jail free” card. Having a black friend and being a racist just means that you need to do better.

As I have said, my theme this year is thanking our allies. There are so many people who have stood up to racism—whether they be black, white, or brown. They have stood up to racists in their families and among

their friends, and that takes real courage. They have stood up to racists in this place, and that takes real courage. Sometimes we might be in a room where everybody is thinking the same and acting the same and we might have to speak out and be uncomfortable. That takes courage and those are the people whom I thank—not the people who tried to explain it away. I want to thank those people who have gone before me on whose shoulders I stand.

I end with the words of the first black man to ever vote in Britain: Ignatius Sancho. He said:

“as you are not to be a boy all your life, and I trust would not be reckoned a fool, use your every endeavour to be a good man.”

1.46 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I thank the hon. Members who have secured this important debate at a time when the discussion of British history and its connection to race has been more prominent than I can remember in my lifetime.

History is itself imperfect because it belongs to those who hold the pen. We can see that in the rewriting of history by Roman emperors to eradicate their rivals, and, in truth, in the lack of representation of minorities at some of the key moments in British history such as the empire, the Victorian era and the world wars. I wholeheartedly agree that we should include the stories of black, Asian and other minorities who were there at these critical points in our shared nation's past. That is already outlined in the history curriculum, and it is right that teachers are empowered to choose on which sections they focus.

Although we should seek to present a balanced view of our history, including all of those representations, at the same time we should unashamedly teach our children about British progress, and we should be proud of the country that we are today. Yes, we should teach the horrors of slavery, but we should also teach people about William Wilberforce's work in this place over 30 years to pass the first abolition of slavery Act. That was no small feat. We should teach the constraints on women in history and the courage of the suffragettes. We should teach children about the brave participation of the Indians, Africans and people across the Caribbean in the world wars, when Britain and the Commonwealth did so much to protect the freedoms of the people of Europe. We should teach about the heroes, the pioneers, the inventors—the public servants so aptly described by the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare).

That balance should follow through when we talk about racism in schools. To understate racism is to do a great wrong, because we do not confront that prejudice, we do not give comfort and hope to people that their adversity has been heard. However, to overstate racism is also a problem, because it teaches people that the deck is stacked against them when it might not be. It also damages individual aspiration and trust in institutions, and both of those are key to a person's success.

When it comes to tackling racial disadvantage, we should be able to hold the nuance and detail at the forefront of our mind. Some voices in the current debate across society want us to say that the country is structurally racist, and I see people who say that there is absolutely nothing wrong and that we do not need to talk about race. I do not agree with either.

The three best performing races at GCSE level are ethnic minorities, and black African children outperform the average. We should be proud of that. We are one of only three countries in Europe—along with Ireland and Finland—that are obliged to collect racial and ethnic data. We should be proud of that. We have made great strides in diversity in Parliament and in the Conservative party. I see the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), on the Front Bench. I am sure that during my time in Parliament she will be in the Cabinet, and that will be through her own sheer talent and the opportunity that this country has afforded us, which is why both of our families decided to move here and make this country their home.

However, the worst-performing group at GCSE is black Caribbean children. When we look at race across society, we can see there is much more that we need to do in building stronger families, in education, in employment, in the criminal justice system, in health and, in particular, in career progression. I am really glad that the Minister is working on the race and ethnic disparity commission, because she will be looking at the details, and at the pockets and places where we need to do more. I am sure that she will help to continue the progress that this country is making. If someone is bright, no matter what their background, their race or which part of the country they come from, they should be able to succeed. We are making great strides in that regard, but, as ever, we need to keep our heads in the detail to continue making progress.

1.50 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Before I begin my speech, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for securing this important debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for constantly championing women and equalities across the Chamber whenever she gets a chance.

Mr Deputy Speaker, today you will probably hear lots of personal stories from MPs, especially MPs of colour. I want briefly to outline what happened to me when I decided to stand in Hampstead and Kilburn—the area where my parents got married in the 1970s, when I went to school and where I have had my two children. I was constantly warned that someone called Tulip Siddiq, with a Muslim last name, would not get elected in Hampstead and Kilburn because we have a significant Jewish community. I was told over and over again to take my husband's last name; but, honestly, who wants to be Mrs Percy? I was told that I would bring the Labour party into shame, and that even Glenda Jackson had almost lost the seat before I took it on. But the truth is that people underestimated the population in Hampstead and Kilburn, and the many communities that we have there. I now have a 14,000 majority and got elected with my Muslim last name—and I may not have two Oscars, but I am working on it. But the comments that I had to put up with were nothing compared with another BME politician who stood for election in my constituency.

Many people will not know this story, but when the general election of 1959 was held, Dr David Pitt made history by being the first person of African descent to stand for Parliament in the constituency of Hampstead, which is now part of my constituency of Hampstead

[Tulip Siddiq]

and Kilburn. Perhaps it was always meant to be that he would stand for election in Hampstead since he came from Hampstead, Grenada. Pitt arrived in Britain from the Caribbean before the Empire Windrush. He won a scholarship to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh, and, during the years of the great depression in the 1930s, his contemporaries said that he saw with his own eyes the links between poverty and ill health, which is when he first became involved in politics.

In 1957, Dr Pitt was selected as the Labour party candidate in the then Conservative seat of Hampstead—let me just emphasise, the then Conservative seat. Even before he won the nomination, it was reported that he had been threatened three times by the British Ku Klux Klan. He had to put up with racist slurs at a hustings, where White Defence League members kept shouting “Keep Britain white” and there was fighting throughout. It was reported that Dr Pitt remained calm and smiling throughout the fighting. The Broadhurst Gardens committee rooms, which I sometimes use, were plastered with posters saying—it shook me when I read this—“Don’t vote for any supporters of coloured immigration”.

Dr Pitt received racist death threats and was told over and over again not to stand for election, but he refused to stand down as a Labour candidate. He tried again to be an MP in 1970, when he stood for Labour in Clapham, but was defeated by a Conservative. During the campaign, an anonymous leaflet was circulated featuring the slogan, “If you desire a coloured for your neighbour vote Labour. If you are already burdened with one vote Tory.”

Dr Pitt did not end up becoming an MP, but he went on to have an illustrious career, including as the head of the British Medical Association, and ultimately ended up becoming a Lord. He was the second person of African descent to become a Lord, and played a leading role in campaigning for the Race Relations Act 1976.

There are times when I feel very frustrated by the lack of diversity in politics. Even in my own party, there are times when I feel worn down by the constant Islamophobia, and the constant online bullying, trolling and racist comments that we endure on a daily basis. I get sick of being asked, “But, no, where are you really from?” and responding, “Frognaal Gardens, NW3, Hampstead, if you want to go and check”, or “Why don’t you go back to your own country?” and replying, “It’s 20 minutes on the Jubilee line.” I get sick of all that, but then I remember that I stand on the shoulders of giants such as Dr David Pitt. He had to put up with so much more than I have had to put up with. I hope that, wherever he is now, he is looking at the Chamber and at the first person of colour representing the constituency that he sought to serve. I hope he is proud of the country to which he gave so much of himself.

1.55 pm

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): Black History Month is a significant opportunity to celebrate the efforts of Britons from diverse backgrounds who helped to build our great nation, shine a spotlight on their stories, and demonstrate our country’s tolerance and diversity. We are raised to celebrate pluralism, opportunity and aspiration, and we should all be exceptionally proud of our history—I know I am.

Since the Romans, people of colour have represented many of the gold and silver threads that run through our nation’s rich and glorious national tapestry. Over the past 200 years or so, Britain’s history has been marked by the emancipation of people from poverty and tyranny. In 1808, the Royal Navy established the West Africa Squadron, with the objective of tackling the Atlantic slave trade through patrolling the waters off west Africa. Between 1808 and 1860, the West Africa Squadron freed in excess of 150,000 Africans. More recently, in the second world war, Britain stood with her imperial family and allies against the tyranny of Nazism and totalitarianism, and led the fight to emancipate Europe from Hitler’s grasp and Asia from the Japanese empire.

Under this Conservative Government, and frankly for as long as I can remember, those from ethnic minorities have been doing better. We are doing better at school and are entering universities in ever higher numbers. More people from BAME backgrounds are entering apprenticeships, which equip them with the vital skills they need to secure employment. At the same time, the number of black people being stopped and searched has dropped from 117 incidents per 1,000 black people in 2009-10 to 38 in 2018-19.

The Conservatives focus on the individual, regardless of their ethnicity, religious beliefs or sexual orientation. Let us not forget that the first black, mixed-race Member of Parliament was John Stewart, a Conservative, who was elected after the Great Reform Act 1832. Mancherjee Bhownagree from the Indian subcontinent was the first British Indian Conservative MP, elected in 1895—a third of a century before Labour’s first Indian-origin Member of Parliament.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Although the Labour party has not yet managed to have a female Prime Minister and was the third or fourth party to have a non-white Member of Parliament, it has one record, which is that Bill Morris was the first major black trade union leader. He got that position by doing his job well. People on both sides of the House are trying to put forward that merit issue.

Imran Ahmad Khan: I always feel an immense privilege when the Father of the House intercedes; it is a great honour to raise his interest in anything I have to say.

Despite such delightful interjections and the Conservatives’ long history of advancing pluralism and diversity, there is still a long road to travel and a great journey ahead of us to achieve an ever more equal society. I believe that that can be achieved, and that journey can be made, only through the power of the individual, individual liberties and free markets, and by celebrating and learning about our history. Those are the ways to arrive at the destination. For reasons way beyond my limited understanding, Labour believes that it has some form of ownership over immigrant populations and the descendants of those immigrant populations, such as myself. It thinks it can permanently rely on our vote. Yet it is the Conservatives who today champion and have always championed aspiration and opportunity, regardless of one’s background or any other characteristics. It is for that exact reason that my late father, who travelled from the North-West Frontier of what was then British India, now Pakistan, and served in the NHS, was a lifelong Conservative supporter.

During the recent Black Lives Matter protests, I was disheartened to read banners stating, “Capitalism demands inequality”. They were clear for the world to see. I have rarely seen such a poor understanding of capitalism or inequality. Let us not forget—it behoves Opposition Members to listen to this point—that the key principle of capitalism is the voluntary exchange of goods and services between parties. There is no obligation, no coercion—only consent. Attacking the economic system that has unequivocally improved the lives of billions across the world will only lead to us all being far worse off. There has been a great misapprehension among many people confusing capitalism with mercantilism. For that, I would suggest a little bit of economic history would be helpful.

For those who wish to have state controls and impositions on free trade globally, let us also not forget that it is free trade more than any Government policy, ever, of any country in the world, that has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty throughout the third world, throughout Africa, throughout the sub-continent of India and elsewhere. It is through the power of fair trade that, while in 1950, 1.8 billion people of the entire global population of only 2.52 billion lived in extreme poverty, by 2015, 0.7 billion people of a population of 7.35 billion lived in extreme poverty. That is a very strong argument for free market economics, the power of free trade and Conservative values. If we are to achieve a society where everyone, regardless of any physical trait, thrives and succeeds, the only route is through Conservative values of enhancing individual liberty and championing free market economics.

2.2 pm

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I will be brief, because I have not got much choice. Following that last speech, I would just point out that the early MPs whom the hon. Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) mentioned served in here decades before the Labour party even existed. It would have been a bit tricky for us to get any MPs elected, white or non-white, before we even existed. The Labour party was created in its present structure in 1918 and it was only four years later that the first Labour Indian MP was elected, Shapurji Saklatvala, who was the MP for Battersea.

I would like to talk today about a very specific area of Black History Month and that is the black curriculum, with specific reference to the Caribbean and the struggle for independence. On the 60th anniversary of Jamaican independence—eight years ago—I attended a ceremony in Waltham Forest town hall marking that anniversary. Even then, eight years ago, the generation who fought for independence and to throw off the shackles of colonialism was slipping from memory, into history, and that period of the late 1950s and early 1960s is now slipping from memory into history even more. That is a dangerous situation, where we might lose that collective memory.

I would like to pay tribute to my friend Bernie Grant, who, as has been mentioned, came in here in 1987. Unusually among British politicians, Bernie moved to Britain as an adult. He grew up in Guyana and came here when he was 19 years old, in 1963. He took part in the struggle for independence and he continued to do that, as a trade unionist and a councillor, when he came here. He came here just after Jamaican independence and just before his own country, Guyana, gained independence in the mid-1960s.

The loss of the generation who were instrumental in gaining independence and self-government was further brought home to me in the summer with the death of Everton Weekes, the great West Indian cricketer. He was one of the few remaining links between our era and the post-war era in the Caribbean, where such strides were made politically and in sport. The Caribbean became the dominant force in the world in cricket, which has been the one force that has driven unity in the Caribbean. There was a dream—Michael Manley’s dream—that the Caribbean would have some sort of unity. The Federation of the West Indies was created around 1960 but, partly because of the opportunism of rivals, it lasted only four years and then collapsed.

Sporting endeavour has been a unifying link between the islands of the West Indies. In the West Indies, sport and politics are more closely linked than they are probably anywhere else on the planet, and I suspect that Jamaica is the only country that could produce a Prime Minister such as Michael Manley. Not only was he a great leader and a great advocate of emancipation, but he wrote the magisterial volume “A History of West Indies Cricket”. It is a great big doorstop of a book, but it is a real page-turner and a superb history book. He was a scholar and a giant among mid-20th century politicians around the world.

It seems extraordinary now, but it is well within living memory that there was a great controversy in the West Indies over the appointment of the first black player as the captain of its cricket team—an appointment that was made only after a long campaign led by C.L.R. James, the great writer, historian and journalist. It was a big deal in the Caribbean at the time, and it was seen as one of the great stepping stones to throwing off the shackles of colonialism and imperialism. The beneficiary of that appointment was the great Frank Worrell; whenever I mention him, I want to call him the immortal Frank Worrell, but if he had been immortal, I suppose he would not have gone and died. He can lay claim to being one of the greatest leaders that any sport has produced, and he is a great example for future generations.

C.L.R. James, who lived in Brixton in his later years, began the campaign for independence in the Caribbean in the 1920s and 1930s, when it was hardly talked about in this country. He came to Britain in 1932 with Learie Constantine, who was a great cricketer, a politician and a barrister. A few years before David Pitt—he was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq)—went to the House of Lords, Learie Constantine became the first non-white peer.

My central point is this: all the people I have talked about—C.L.R. James, Frank Worrell, Bernie Grant and the great Jamaican writer and journalist Una Marson—have gone. They are no longer with us, so the links with the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, which saw emancipation and independence in the Caribbean, are withering. I would hate to see a generation come up—particularly the children and grandchildren of migrants—who do not have that collective memory to inherit, and who do not know about the struggles for independence. The best way of honouring those who led the struggle for independence is by incorporating that history into the curriculum today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): A few people have come in since I gave the advice as to why there is no time limit. The call list is quite extensive, so please exercise a little bit of self-discipline—everybody has been very good during this debate—to ensure that you do not go on too long, otherwise you will reduce the time that is available for other people later on.

2.9 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow many other hon. Members. We have talked a little bit about black history—that is appropriate, as it is, indeed, Black History Month—and I would like to echo some of the things that have been said so far. We have already talked about how black history is British history, and British history is black history; these things are synonymous. I want to say right at the beginning that, whatever our different political views—this got a little bit tetchy for a while, but I hope it has calmed down—the one thing on which we can all agree is that black history is British history. That shared bond that people in these wonderful four nations all share together—whether they be white, black, Asian or whatever ethnicity—is critically important. Indeed, it is one of the reasons why I think the Union we have is so precious.

In that spirit of camaraderie and friendship, I would like very gently to take on some of the points that we have heard from certain Labour Members—very gently. I have heard very moving speeches from Labour Members, including the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who is always very passionate about this issue. She knows a lot about it and campaigns a lot about it, and I think everybody in this House respects her for that. However, as somebody who loves history—I studied it as a boy and at Oxford University—I think it is fair to say that, when I entered Oxford University in 2004, this issue, if I were to paraphrase it, of decolonising the curriculum, which has been mentioned, was not a common issue and was not talked about very much. I studied history at that university and enjoyed it very much, and my studies included this issue and a range of different things in all different continents and different countries. I also studied a lot of British history, and I can tell hon. Members that, throughout my whole life, the study of this country's history has not made me feel inferior. It has not made me feel that I do not belong here. It has not made me feel that somehow my unique part in the story of this country—indeed, the unique part that all of us of every ethnicity has in this country—is not recognised.

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is making a very important point about who we identify with. Given what the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) feels about children who read books by authors of a different colour to them, would he agree with me that most children do not actually know the colour of the skin of the author of a book they are reading, and in fact we do not need to have people who share the same skin colour as us to identify with them?

Bim Afolami: I thank the Minister for her intervention. It is interesting because I have three boys—they are mixed race boys—and my wife told me something recently. I do not know whether I am meant to announce this in the Chamber, but why not? *[Interruption.]* Yes, I should be careful. She remarked to me recently that when she

was trying to identify the black individual in an illustrated book with people of different colours—dark, mixed race, white, Asian: it was a complete mosaic—my son did not know what she was talking about. He could not conceive—*[Interruption.]* No. He did not understand how we would think about one individual as different from another simply on the basis of the colour of their skin. It is worth saying that he is very young, but my broader point is—

Several hon. Members rose—

Bim Afolami: No, no. My broader point is that it is very important that we do not allow the teaching and interpretation of our necessarily complex and diverse, yet brilliant and great British history to become very ideologically divisive. I would therefore reject comments from those who say that somehow we need comprehensively to reframe the entire nature of our history to address what they suggest. I believe that what we need to do—

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tulip Siddiq: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dawn Butler: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bim Afolami: I will continue. What we actually need to do is to look forward, understand our past, understand where we have failed and understand that we have made progress, but accept that there is much further to go.

I would like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie), who was the first black Conservative MP in the modern era; I do not want to get involved in the historical debate about when the first non-white MP was elected, because we will get ourselves tied up. He has done credit to himself and his family through his service in this House, his record as a successful businessman before coming to the House and the kind advice, wisdom and guidance that he gives to all Members as a senior Member. I remember watching him on “Question Time”—I think it was even before he had been elected, such was the reliability of the voters in Windsor that people were sufficiently confident he would win as a Conservative. I remember watching him and thinking, “Maybe I can become a black Conservative MP as well.” I pay tribute to him.

Dawn Butler: Why, because you saw somebody who was black, and—*[Interruption.]*

Bim Afolami: I was trying to be so nice to the hon. Lady. I do not know why she is carping from a sedentary position, but I will continue. Two words have come up quite a lot in the debate. I would like to address them, and I address them as a Conservative.

Tulip Siddiq: Is this what they teach you at Eton?

Bim Afolami: Okay; let's address this. The hon. Lady shouts from a sedentary position, “That's what they teach at Eton.” First, I am not sure that they did, but regardless of that point, yes, I went to Eton College. It is a good school. I am proud of being able to go to that school. I am proud of the fact that people of all backgrounds and all races are able to go to that school. I reject the idea that if someone is black or non-white, there are certain places that they are not able to go.

Tulip Siddiq: I will say this gently, because I like the hon. Member. I have a lot of time for him, and he has been making a gentle argument. Is there not a difference between young Asian girls and young black boys who have our backgrounds and our parental role models—I say “our” because I had a middle-class, privileged background as well—and the young black men and young Asian women growing up in the council estate in Kilburn in my constituency, who are constantly stopped and searched? Is racism not about intersectionality? We came from different backgrounds and had different advantages, and it is just not the same for everyone.

I am very open about the privilege and opportunities that I had growing up, which is why I want to make life better for those who have not had those opportunities. There is a big difference between being a middle-class Asian woman and being working-class, growing up in poverty and facing double discrimination. Intersectionality is what I am trying to bring to the argument, because I feel like the hon. Member is completely missing the point. My point about Eton is—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Interventions should be short. I did remind the House about the length of speeches, and we are in danger of a time limit being imposed if we are not careful.

Bim Afolami: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I like the hon. Lady as well. What she says has a huge amount of truth. Of course there is a difference between people of different backgrounds, and it is in that diversity that we find strength as a country. I accept that I have had advantages that certain white working-class boys or girls may not have had, and I have had advantages that certain black people from working-class backgrounds may also not have had. Of course that is true, but at the same time—and I think this view is shared on both sides of the House; it is not partisan—we need to make sure that everybody can aspire to everything and there are no no-go areas, whatever someone’s race or background. That message of aspiration is one of the key reasons why I became a Conservative.

We have made progress. I do not want to repeat what others have said about where we have fallen short and need to make progress. I look at what my friend the noble Lady Morrissey, has done over the last few years with the 30% Club to get more women into senior positions in big public companies. We should look at that sort of approach and think about how we can increase the number of black people and other minorities in leadership positions.

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Member give way?

Bim Afolami: I will continue, because time is short.

That sort of aspiration is important, but the question is often how we get there. As I have said, we need to seek out and identify talent wherever it appears, support people who do not necessarily have the advantages that others have—that is people from all types of background and of all races—and accept the diversity and intersectionality that the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn described. At the same time, we must reject the fundamental principle of identity politics, that we are mostly black, Asian, white—one of those characteristics. We must allow individuality to be the primary focus of how we think about diversity, opportunity, support and

aspiration. I reject the idea, for example, that we should have quotas. I believe in targets and help in identifying where people need support.

I see that the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) is on the Liberal Democrat Front Bench. She has not made a speech yet, so I will not criticise her, and I am sure that she will address the point that I am about to make. Liberal Democrats say—and many people in Labour have suggested this in the past—that we should have all-black shortlists, but I reject that approach. Quotas are a bad idea, because that means that everyone else will look at the Minister, or at me, or at my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor and say, “They are only there because of their race.” That is a dangerous thing. We need to recognise the past, welcome our progress and look forward to the future with confidence as a United Kingdom.

2.21 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Like others, I will to be brief, so that everyone who has applied to speak in the debate is called. It is brilliant that the debate is oversubscribed, because that shows how the debate has developed around the country, as well as the pressure on MPs.

We are in this debate at a time when the Black Lives Matter movement has become big and strong in the United States and around the world. After George Floyd was killed, demonstrations took place, as we know, across the USA and, indeed, across the world. Many people—indigenous people in different parts of the world and minorities all over the world—saw themselves in the treatment of George Floyd at the hands of American police. We would do well to remember that this movement is not going to disappear—it empowers and unites people around the world.

We should approach the debate with a sense of reality. The House of Commons Library has produced an excellent briefing paper, as all its briefing papers are, entitled “Race and Ethnic Disparities”. I urge Members to read it carefully, because it shows the situation in health, education, housing, stop and search, poverty, the criminal justice system and so much else in our society. If someone is young and black, they are more likely to be poor, to be stopped and searched and to underachieve in school; less likely to go to college and even less likely to go to university; and more likely to have a lower life expectancy and lower income in future.

Those are devastating statistics—here, in 2020, all those years after we introduced the first race relations legislation under a Labour Government in the 1960s. We should not be complacent, and this debate—I hope that it will become an annual event—should provide a review of the progress, or not, that has been made in these matters. I urge Members to look carefully at that document.

I have heard the speeches from Government Members, who talk quite reasonably about the huge achievements of individuals who have broken out of the cycle of poverty. For Opposition Members, it is not individuals we want to break out; we want a collective response to develop a system that provides decent education, housing and health opportunities for all, recognising that we have to provide services that deal with the inequalities that people face.

[Jeremy Corbyn]

As a councillor in Haringey in the 1970s, it was my honour to chair the community development committee. The successor chair of that committee was my great friend Bernie Grant. We saw in that the way in which we could put public resources into the most disadvantaged communities to empower and strengthen them and help their young people get the same chances as others all across the borough. Our approach on the Labour Benches is essentially a collective one. That is why we founded the national health service. That is why we developed council housing. That is why we developed so many other of our collective services in this country.

This debate takes place not that long after the scandal of the Windrush business hit the headlines and hit this House. It was a deliberately created hostile environment that led to the injustice of the Windrush generation—a generation that came to this country and gave so much in health, in education, in engineering and in so much other work, and helped to improve the living standards of all of us. Ministers should not be unaware of the hurt that is felt among that generation about the way they were treated by that hostile environment.

We should look at the way in which we treat migrants to our society. Why do we have so many people in immigration detention with no charge against them, held effectively in prison with an indeterminate sentence until the Home Office gets round to dealing with their case? We should not be so proud or so complacent about what we do. When we have a Home Secretary who talks about using the Navy to repel desperate asylum seekers and refugees who have risked all to cross the world's busiest shipping lanes to try to get to a place of safety, can we replace that rhetoric with the principle of humanity and an open heart to people all around this world?

In my constituency, like many others, I do not have to walk very far from my house to find asylum seekers whose process is endlessly lost somewhere in the miasma of the Home Office filing system, with no recourse to public funds, sleeping on the streets, begging and looking for a meal from a church, a synagogue or a mosque in order just to get by. Let us have a sense of reality about what modern Britain is like, and the degree of racism that is still there, sadly, in our society—and the way in which the far right is organising to try to make the situation worse.

We should be full of admiration for those in the black community who have organised themselves, and those in the former colonies who organised to defeat the occupations by Britain, France, Italy, Spain and so many other European colonial powers, and bring about independence. I would like our children in our schools to understand, and see as a central part of the curriculum, the significance of the Pan-African Congress held in 1945 at Chorlton-cum-Hardy town hall in Manchester. It was largely ignored at the time, but the future leaders of many African countries were there at that conference. Indeed, less than 12 years later, Ghana achieved its independence as the first African colony to do so. The generation that came and organised the black community in Britain in the 1950s and '60s included John La Rose and other great poets from the Caribbean who founded New Beacon Books in my area of London. They did so much to empower and used the work of Claudia Jones

and many others in order to give cultural strength and cultural value, through carnival and so much else, to what the Caribbean community were achieving here.

The black self-organisation that was opposed, and then eventually accepted, in the Labour party meant that we had black sections and that my right hon. Friend—my great friend—the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) was elected to Parliament in 1987, along with Keith Vaz, Paul Boateng and of course Bernie Grant, so sadly no longer with us. Those people did so much. Others paved the way by going into Parliament, including Dadabhai Naoroji in Finsbury at the turn of the century and, of course, the great Saklatvala in Battersea later on.

We should look at the history that our children learn, and not just in one month of the year. I beg to differ with some of the Members who have spoken already: I do want to see the decolonisation of our history. I want our children to understand how black communities came together—how people stood up against the abuse that colonialism was and is against their lives and brought about independence.

Christine Jardine: On that very point, we have talked before about how in so many communities in this country there are statues, streets and so on that are named after slave owners and colonialists. People like me who come from Glasgow are immensely proud that Nelson Mandela Place is named after Nelson Mandela, but we are completely unaware of the history of the names of the other streets around it. That is the sort of thing we need to attack when we look at education and black history.

Jeremy Corbyn: Indeed, I love Nelson Mandela Place in Glasgow—it is fantastic. If I may, I would like to convey through the hon. Member my congratulations to the University of Glasgow for recognising that it should repay the compensation money that it was given at the end of the slave trade. The issue of colonial brutality should be taught to our children, as should the way in which the slave trade enriched the already rich in Britain and how some of our biggest companies relied on the slave trade to provide profits from banking and sugar.

Kemi Badenoch: Does the right hon. Gentleman not feel that turning the curriculum into a list of all the things that Britain has done wrong to people of a certain race would distort the history of our nation and not give a true picture of the activities not only of this country but of people who share my skin colour, which were not always as wholesome as people on his side want to make out?

Jeremy Corbyn: It is not about distorting history; it is about the reality of history that should be taught. That means understanding what the slave trade was about, what the brutality of colonialism is and the way in which people were treated.

There are many in this House who say that William Wilberforce was wonderful in his presentation of the abolition legislation in this very Chamber—excellent—and that Thomas Clarkson risked all to tour the whole country explaining to people just how evil the slave trade was, showing them the accoutrements of torture that he took with him throughout the country, but the reality is that the slave trade was abolished and slavery

was abolished by the selfless bravery of slaves who rejected it in the plantations in the Caribbean, the Americas and elsewhere. I want children in our schools to understand what those people—such as Paul Bogle, who led the Morant Bay uprising and, of course, Sam Sharpe, who led the rebellion in western Jamaica in 1832, as brilliantly chronicled by my late, great friend Richard Hart in his book “Slaves Who Abolished Slavery”—went through.

When Sam Sharpe was taken to the gallows, before he was executed he said that he accepted the laws under which he was going to be executed and went on to say:

“I depend for salvation upon the Redeemer, who shed his blood upon Calvary for sinners.”

He was then executed because of his part in leading the rebellion against the slave owners and the sugar plantations of western Jamaica. But at that point the sugar industry was in dire straits: people were losing money in London because the sugar was not coming because of the uprising. That speeded up the process of abolition. To its eternal shame, this House then voted to pay what would now be billions in compensation to slave owners, but not to the slaves themselves.

There are many other books that I want our children to read. My great friend Remi Kapo wrote the “Reap the Forgotten Harvest” trilogy of novels about the slave trade. These are the books that I want our children to learn.

In conclusion, history is divisive at one level. It is endlessly controversial and, to me, endlessly fascinating. History educates, history empowers, but history also forms attitudes and opinions, so our children should be brought up understanding that maths and science comes, yes, from Europe, but also from Africa and from the civilisations of what is now called Latin America, and that it comes from China and it comes from so many parts of the world. Our standard of living comes from those people who used their brains to invent so much all over the world, but too often it is taught in the process of some kind of European supremacy over the rest of the world. It does not have to be taught that way; it should be taught in the way of the thirst for knowledge that empowers us all.

We should also teach and recognise that the great writers and poets who have come from the Caribbean and south Asia have enriched our lives massively. I love the work of Andrea Levy. She lived in my constituency before she died. We unveiled a plaque in her memory and her family all came to a little reception we held afterwards, where I met one of her nieces who did not realise quite how famous she was. She was in school and the teacher read out a part of one of Andrea Levy’s books to the class and said, “What do you think of that?” There were a load of blank faces, and the teacher said, “That was written by Andrea Levy.” This girl’s hand went up and she said, “Yeah, that was my auntie.” She did not realise she had been the great writer at that time. We need to popularise the literature by so many writers who have come to this country. My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) mentioned CLR James, and I would mention also Derek Walcott and the great Asian poets such as Tagore and so many others.

Let us give our children the space and the opportunity to learn the history of this country, and to learn the popular history of this country—of ordinary people’s demands to get fair legislation such as trade union

rights, factory Acts and so on—but also to understand what colonialism did and what colonialism did to its victims. That way they will have a better understanding of why the world is as it is at the present time.

That, to me, is what Black History Month should be about, but I would like us not to have Black History Month but to have black history as a central part of our history curriculum all year round for all our children.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. To protect those further down the call list I am introducing a time limit of six minutes, although I suspect it may be further reduced to ensure that more people get in.

2.37 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Opong-Asare) on securing this important debate this afternoon.

I was pleased to attend earlier in the month, albeit virtually, the launch of Black History Month in Southampton. Our city has a proud tradition of celebrating the month, usually with a range of fantastic events in real life, but this year of course it is all virtual. I am reminded that back in 2018 I went, as immigration Minister then, to St Mary’s fire station, where there is a beautiful mural to celebrate the arrival of the Empire Windrush. I gently point out to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) that almost half of those of the Windrush generation who were wronged had either a deportation or a detention prior to 2010 under a Labour Government, albeit perhaps not a Labour Government particularly to his liking, and that it was, of course, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) who coined the phrase “a really hostile environment”. But I do not want this debate to degenerate into party politics; we have already heard, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) said, too much tetchiness this afternoon and this should be a celebration of Black History Month.

I would particularly like to pay tribute to those people like Lou Taylor from Southampton, and Don John and Stevina Southwell, all of whom have reached out to me over the past few years to make sure that I am better educated about the black history of my city, and I will now follow the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), who spoke about cricket, in talking about football, and particularly about a constituent of mine, Paul Williams, who was a professional footballer for Southampton. He had a great career: he moved around the country, but he chose to finish his playing days in Southampton and retired to the city. He can tell horrendous stories of racism in football. I pay tribute to the Premier League and the Football Association for their campaigns to Show Racism the Red Card and Kick It Out, but the reality is that these were not racist events that happened many decades ago; it was less than 20 years ago. It is really shocking to see a man of my age reduced to tears from the experiences he had on the pitch. I heard of his determination to ensure that future generations do not suffer the same. His real passion nowadays is not football, but education, and I met him at one of my local secondary schools to talk about how they could do better to ensure that young people understand the history of our country in the most holistic and rounded way.

[Caroline Nokes]

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Islington North because he said this, too, but we should not be celebrating Black History Month. Perhaps we should not be focusing on history—perhaps it should be about culture, art, music, science and all those fantastic role models across the curriculum. We should not be doing it in a month, because we should be embedding it across the year. As Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, I am proud to be working hand in hand with the Petitions Committee to talk about how we can improve the black history curriculum and make sure that it is properly embedded.

I speak as the representative of a small town called Romsey, the birthplace of a fantastic woman called Florence Nightingale. Every time there is any discussion about removing Nightingale from the history curriculum, there is absolute uproar. The Nightingale Society comes and speaks to me and says, “You have to do everything you can. Of the great Victorians, Nightingale is right up there.” I often say, because sometimes I like to be a little provocative, “How about Mary Seacole?” We have the Seacole wing at the Royal South Hants Hospital, and we have the Nightingale ward in Romsey Hospital. I always say, “Can we not have both? Can we not ensure that the history of our country is properly represented, including all people, all faiths, all colours and all backgrounds?” It is crucial that we work very hard to do just that.

She is no longer in her place, which is disappointing, but I was delighted to hear the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) talk about allyship, and that is such an important phrase. When I took over as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, I came under fire from SOAS because I was not diverse enough. It appeared utterly ignorant of the process, which is now an election—it is hardly my fault that it was an uncontested election—and I said to it then as I say to it now, “You have got me wrong if you think I cannot be an ally of black communities, of Asian communities and of minority ethnic communities. You have got me absolutely wrong if you think that my Committee will not go after compulsory reporting of the ethnicity pay gap every bit as much as we care about the compulsory reporting of the gender pay gap.” I say to the Minister, gently, please can we have that reporting back? She should expect over the course of the coming months that my pleas will not be so gentle.

It is imperative that wherever we are from and from whatever background, we are determined, willing and happy to stand up and be counted. As the hon. Member for Brent Central said, we must be prepared to speak up and not just stand silent. By standing silent, we are not doing our part.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The hon. Lady is making a very good and passionate speech. She just mentioned that we now have a mandatory obligation to report on the gender pay gap, but not on the ethnicity pay gap. For that reason exactly, I introduced my private Member’s Bill about all ethnic minority shortlists, because local parties have the opportunity under the Equalities Act 2010 to have all women shortlists. Does she not agree that there is a gap in the Equalities Act in that sense?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady makes an important point, but it is not just about shortlists. I am a big supporter of the work done under section 106 of the 2010 Act to make sure that we are identifying not just those who make it as candidates, but those who do not, because it is imperative that every party across the board looks carefully at how they are encouraging people to come forward and stand for election. They need to make sure that the barriers that do exist—they exist for women, for disabled people and for BAME people—are beaten down at every level, whether that be local councils or this place.

I always say that when I arrived here in 2010, there were massive celebrations on this side of the House, because finally we had more than 17 women elected to the Conservative Benches. We are now more than 80, and I always argue that that progress is too slow. While the Chamber looks very different from how it looked just 10 years ago, there remains a huge amount to do. I have absolutely no doubt that my hon. Friend the Minister will soon be in the Cabinet, but that is not enough. We need there to be more women. We need there to be more people from BAME backgrounds. We need there to be more people with disability. We need more LGBTQ people, and the list goes on.

I finish—almost promptly, but I was allowed an intervention—by saying that my Committee will undoubtedly look at the new commission that has been set up to look at racial disparities, but my message to the Government is that the time for reviews is done. We have done many reviews over the past two decades. What we need is action.

2.44 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this important debate, and I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler): it is not enough for someone not to be racist, they have to be an anti-racist, because if they are not part of the solution, they are just another part of the problem.

I have been pleased to listen to the contributions today, or at least most of them, because every time I hear about black history, I learn more and more. Like most people in this House, I never learnt black history at school. The majority of my learning came from my love of reading and my frequent visits to the Brixton library. I love learning about Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, and those international perspectives are so important, but the UK has its own rich civil rights struggle, and I want British children also to learn about that. I want them to learn about the Bristol bus boycotts, Mary Seacole, Claudia Jones, Olive Morris, CLR James, the first black Members to enter this House and much more.

Those who do not think it necessary to learn black history in schools, or that it should be confined to certain lessons, have to acknowledge how damaging it is not to see yourself reflected in your history. Black history is British history, and how can we possibly learn about this country in its fullness and how it came to be if we do not learn about slavery and colonialism, and the impacts they have directly had on how our country is today?

This debate is extremely timely because, as Members will have just heard, we found recently that no subject has received more signatories for parliamentary petitions than getting black history taught as part of our national curriculum, yet the Government have refused requests from campaigning organisations such as the Black Curriculum to change our curriculum. Given that this is coupled with the new guidance about anti-capitalist texts in schools, I am a bit suspicious, because I also did not learn about the miners' strikes, the poll tax riots or the achievements of trade unions at school.

Decolonising our education is every bit as much about class as it is about race. Heaven forbid that working-class kids are taught about movements for change—they might start to get ideas that they have power as citizens, that when they see injustice they should challenge it and that if they persevere they might just win.

I remember that the first thing I wrote in my year 7 history book, in Mr Smart's class, was, "We study the past to live the present with an eye on the future." I believe we need to address our shameful past and shameful present and look to a future of racial equality. We have to be willing to do that to inform and inspire the next generation, because nobody is born racist. Racism is ignorance, and what is education if not the absence of ignorance?

This history is not something that we need just to be added on at the end of a lesson, one day a week, one day of the year, in one single section of our curriculum or even in this one month. Too often, the burden is left to our teachers to move things around and find time. Recently, I was proud to go to Streatham Wells Primary School and find nine and 10-year-olds learning about unconscious bias. I applaud our teachers who make this special effort and ask the Government to follow their lead.

When we learn about black history, it has to be done properly. Yes, we must learn about our allies, such as William Wilberforce, and what they did to help the struggle, but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) pointed out, slavery ended because of the slave revolts. It ended because of those people who were willing to risk their lives. Colonialism ended because people were no longer willing to have this country rule over them.

We need to applaud those heroes and heroines in history. We need to look at people such as Toussaint Louverture, Nanny of the Maroons and Yaa Asantewaa, who shares the same heritage as me and my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead. We need to look this again as a form of reparations. In my maiden speech, I spoke about reparations, how they do not have to be about just giving large sums away and how instead they are about looking about how we address things such as giving certain artefacts back and offering an apology. I would add educational reparations to that: decolonising our education.

Too often, when we challenge racism in this House, we are told that we do not recognise progress and that we do not like our country. I would like to say: we are the progress. When we look at the Benches on both sides of the House, we are shown the progress that we have made. But I came to this House to change things, not just to clap my hands for the mediocre things that

have gone in the past. To quote a modern-day philosopher—naturally, a Streatham native—the rapper Santan Dave:

"least racist is still racist".

We have a long way to go. So when I challenge in racism in my country, I do not want anyone to tell me that I do not love my country and I should go back to somewhere else, because what more love could you have for your country than to make it the very best place in the world for all people to live, no matter the colour of their skin?

2.49 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I thank hon. Members for securing this debate. Every Member of this House was rightly appalled at the footage of George Floyd's death and the subsequent examples of racial injustice in the United States that reignited the debate about race relations in America and, indeed, in the United Kingdom. I am glad that we are engaging in that conversation in the round, but I am wary of the growing trend of adopting a whole ideology of a country that has a different history of race and race relations from our own.

The role of Britain and the Royal Navy in abolishing the slave trade is—I thought until I arrived in this debate—incontrovertible and clear. Britain has welcomed people of all ethnicities from around the world and has a history of tolerance and accepting other cultures, much more so than many other countries. That is not to say that atrocities and injustices have not been committed. It is right to acknowledge the past wrongs that ethnic minorities have faced in our history much more than those imported from the USA. However, that is a history, and throughout any history, it is possible to identify abhorrent views and actions.

As I give this speech, my hon. Friend the Minister is sitting at the Dispatch Box. She is an accomplished lawyer, Minister and the daughter of Nigerian immigrants. We have one of the most diverse Governments in memory and, indeed, in the world. My concern is that we will turn into a country of identity politics based on race and colour rather than merit and character. We have seen that shift in the United States, and I strongly believe that it should not be encouraged in the United Kingdom.

An example of that shift can be seen in the teaching of critical race theory in the United States, and now even in some schools in the UK. That is a dangerous and divisive ideology that should not be adopted in educational theory. It creates a system where people are identified solely by their race and starts from a premise of identifying them as victims of oppression. I encourage all hon. Members to read black professor Thomas Sowell's work on the subject.

Similarly, unconscious bias, and especially the so-called training about it, is not at all uncontroversial and often rests on pseudo-scientific assertions, such as phrenology and eugenics did in their time. It is time for that and the potential for damage to race relations that arises from it to be challenged.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) suggested that if we celebrate Black History Month, we focus hard on black British history, but also go beyond that to greater diversity. In that spirit, I am pleased to turn to a patriotic black role model connected to my constituency. On the centenary of the first world

[Andrew Lewer]

war, I wrote a piece for local Northampton magazine about Walter Tull, a famous black footballer who played for Northampton Town and Tottenham Hotspur and served as an officer in the footballers' battalions on the fronts in Italy and France.

Walter Tull was the first player to enlist from Northampton Town. He fought in the battle of the Somme, and he was one of the first mixed heritage officers in the regular British Army. His fellow officers spoke about his leadership and bravery under fire and recommended him for a Military Cross. He died in action in 1918. Even today, he is well known around Northampton and celebrated as a local hero.

Walter Tull is one of many examples of black British men and women who have contributed so much to our country's history. They should rightly be recognised in our national consciousness and history, but not just because of the colour of their skin. They should be celebrated because of their actions, their strength of character and their contribution to our nation's identity and history.

Many of the references to the United States are of great concern. We must not simply be led by what goes on in the United States, but look to our own history. Nevertheless, there are huge and wonderful examples to be taken, and no greater than that of Martin Luther King. I am pleased to say that he was offered, accepted and came in person to receive an honorary doctorate from Newcastle University, my old university, in 1967. His chief of staff, Dr Wyatt Tee Walker, was one of the most ardent critics of critical race theory. No one did more for race relations than him, yet no one was more strident in their opposition to critical race theory and its child, unconscious bias training.

2.54 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): George Floyd is murdered agonisingly over nine long minutes in Minneapolis, and in Newcastle 5,000 people of all ages, races and backgrounds join an online protest seeking real change. Racism is global, and our response must be.

Let me start by saying why Black History Month matters so much to me personally. I grew up in Newcastle in the '70s. I went to fantastic local schools, where I learned the history of our great region, and I was inspired by local heroes such as Stephenson and Parsons to become an engineer, but I learned nothing of black history. I would have been hard put to name a dozen famous black people outside music or sports. My knowledge of black achievement was limited to those two sectors and a few walk-on parts in the great histories of nations, generally as hapless victims or stereotypical villains.

I remember as a child being inspired by the words of Martin Luther King, but I did not know that he had come to Newcastle University, that it was the only non-American university to honour him in his lifetime and that he made an amazing speech accepting that honour—a call to arms and international solidarity in the fight against racism. That speech is online and remains relevant today. I did not know that Frederick Douglass, the American campaigner and abolitionist and the most famous black person of his time, lived and lectured in Newcastle in the 1840s. Indeed, it is sad to

think that, given the lack of diversity in academia now, Newcastle may have had a higher proportion of BAME lecturers then than it does today. I never learned that African soldiers were garrisoned on Hadrian's wall. I want in particular to thank historian and fellow Geordie David Olusoga for celebrating the long history of black Britain, often in the face of virulent racism.

That is why Black History Month matters. Yes, there is justice in telling the stories of those whom history has overlooked; there is also power in sharing the diversity of achievement that is our history. My own achievement of being Newcastle's first black MP is put into context; I am not an outlier, but I stand on the shoulders of the many who go before me in our shared past. So yes, I want black history taught in our schools. I want young girls and boys of each and every ethnicity to learn British history, and I want them to know that Geordie Africanus has a long and exciting history and future in our region.

The stories of black lives now need to be celebrated. Let me give just one example. My constituent Miriam Mafemba came to England 21 years ago from Zimbabwe, where she faced harassment because of her trade union activism. Here, she studied nursing and now works on the frontline against covid. As an active Unison member, she fights for better conditions for all, seeking to address the snowy white peaks that unfortunately remain in our beloved NHS. Miriam, and all those fighting to improve working lives, represents the future of Newcastle.

I praise the work of trade unions such as Unison and all who seek to improve the working conditions of their black members. When Martin Luther King was assassinated, he was in Memphis supporting American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union sanitation workers in their struggle to be recognised as key workers. Their sign was "I am a man" because they were always called "boy". We may not be called "boy" now, but racism in the workplace remains a barrier to the success of so many. Explicit racial discrimination may be illegal, but implicit stereotyping, exclusion and the burden of being the only black person in the room forms the ceiling of achievement for so many.

The impact of workplace discrimination has been highlighted by the pandemic. Covid feeds on inequality, but I am angry that six months into this pandemic, all we seem to know is that black and minority ethnic people are two to three times more likely to die, not why, where or when. Does the Government Equalities Office have no data analysts?

Kemi Badenoch: It is interesting that the hon. Lady raises that point. She may not be aware that I have been looking at that issue since June, and I will give an oral statement on Thursday that will answer many of those questions.

Chi Onwurah: I look forward greatly to that statement. Perhaps then the Minister will tell me whether it is true, as I have been told, that the number of BAME women with covid in Newcastle hospitals is eight times that of white women with covid.

I praise the impact of Black History Month and what it does in telling our shared history, but it needs to do more. How do we eradicate racism? I was set that challenge by young people during a Black History Month event recently, and I was flummoxed. I realised that I do not spend enough time imagining the end of

racism, but we should. Yes, it will take a race equality strategy, and real action and legislation, but there is more that we can all do as individuals. As someone who was on the national executive of the anti-apartheid movement for many years, I often think about why that international movement was so successful. Certainly, we protested in huge numbers all over the world—and certainly we had the best music—but we also made organisations, companies, politicians and countries change. We boycotted, we voted, we made apartheid South Africa a pariah state. We have to do the same thing for racism. We have to make it unacceptable. Do not buy its products, do not vote for its advocates, do not fund its perpetrators and do not click on its content—and, yes, I mean Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and all the social media platforms whose business model is predicated on promoting the extremes.

I look forward to a day when parents will explain racism to their children in the same way that they now explain hanging, drawing and quartering: as a barbaric practice of our past. Black voices will be celebrated in the story of the ending of racism. For too long, history has been written by the victors. We want a world in which success is open to all, and Black History Month can help to achieve that by remembering all our history in colour and making racism history.

3.1 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for securing this important debate. I want to speak today not on behalf of myself but on behalf of a dear friend, a young woman I have mentored since the age of 10. Her name is Chanay Ismael. During the protests this summer, I asked her for her thoughts on how we could improve the issues that were raised during the riots and protests. One of the things she said was that she would like to see black history taught in schools in an integrated curriculum. She said that, as a young black woman, she found it hard to envision being a leader in politics and in society when she did not see those examples being taught in real life. I am here today to speak not on behalf of myself but on behalf of Chanay, to raise the issues that she feels so passionately about, so that people like the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), the first black female British MP, can be recognised and taught in the integrated curriculum in school.

This is not about a cancelling culture; it is about expanding our culture to celebrate all our diversity and what we bring to the table as a wonderful, incredible country and society. Chanay also mentioned that she would like to be able to celebrate and learn about not just political leaders but social leaders, alongside all the other history that she is learning now. She just wants to see that side of history also being taught, and I think that that is a fair argument to raise. I want to represent her today and to ensure that her name is written in the *Hansard* for this debate. I pay tribute to the things that she has taught me about our society.

Mary Seacole has already been mentioned, and I hope that we will be able to incorporate her into our main curriculum when we are teaching about medical history and nursing. When my daughter had to choose a “hero of history”, she chose Mary Seacole, and I hope that, in the future, children across the country will be able to choose her as someone who is celebrated as a

hero of history, and that anyone, from whatever background, will be able to look at her and say, “This was a hero of our past and we want to celebrate her.” I will be brief today. I want to thank and pay tribute to Opposition Members for securing this debate, and I hope that this will allow for a positive way forward in discussing this subject.

3.5 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Following on from the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), who mentioned Mary Seacole, this is something that is close to my heart. It is important that we celebrate some of the great people who have contributed to our country. Some of that work has been led by a number of people campaigning for many years. The Mary Seacole statue at St Thomas’ Hospital in my constituency came about not just because people wanted it, but through 12 years of hard work by the Mary Seacole Trust. Private contributions of more than half a million pounds were secured to put it up. To give the former Chancellor, George Osborne, credit, the Treasury also contributed £250,000 towards it. I want to pay tribute to some of the people who were at the unveiling of the statue in 2016, including the great Baroness Floella Benjamin and the great Dame Elizabeth Anionwu. It is important that we ensure that Mary Seacole’s history and contributions are recognised in our history books.

Both of my children were born at St Thomas’. My daughter was born in 2015 and my son in 2017—a year after the statue was erected. It gave me immense pride, as I was pacing up and down waiting for that child to come out, to see it in the garden of St Thomas’. On it is inscribed the words of *The Times’* Crimean war correspondent, Sir William Howard Russell:

“I trust that England will not forget the one who nursed her sick and who sought out her wounded to aid and succour them and who performed the last office for some of her illustrious dead”.

We have seen that in this pandemic: some of our nurses working around the clock caring for people who have tragically died, and some of our care workers working around the clock on some of the lowest pay caring for our elderly relatives. It is important that we do not forget their contributions. That is why Black History Month is so important. That fight for racial justice must always show the appreciation of that collective history. If not, why are we celebrating it?

A number of people have asked me, “Why do you always talk about race?” Until we have full racial equality, I will not stop talking about race. Unfortunately, we still do not have it in 2020. I am proud to have been the first black woman to be elected to represent my constituency of Lambeth and Southwark in the London Assembly, and to be the first black woman to represent my constituency of Vauxhall, but I do not want to be the first. I want other people to come after me; it is no good just being the first. We have to look at how we are bringing up the next generation to get involved in all spheres of life, not just politics.

As the Minister knows, as she comes from a Nigerian background, our parents tell us when we are younger, “You are going to be a doctor, a nurse or a lawyer,” but how do we make sure that more of our young children have an advantage in all different aspects, that they can see themselves in all different professions, in boardrooms

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

and running their own businesses? That will happen only if there is equality of opportunity from the start for all our young people.

My journey into politics was not easy. People said to me, “Why do you want to do that? Why do you want to go there? Are you sure this is what you want to do?” Even in the last 10 months, I have witnessed and been subject to racism, but that is not going to stop me; it is going to push me even more to make sure we call out some of those ill things. The right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) said that she has been an ally. That is fantastic. We need more people across all sections being allies to black people, calling out some of the things they have seen and calling out the racial injustices, whether in the workplace, at home or in their business. That is what true allyship means.

I went to visit a secondary school in my constituency last week to speak to the year 11s about Black History Month and they gave me a small goody bag. One of the badges in the goody bag said “Black 365 Days”. I am not black only in the month of October; I am black every day. It is important that we celebrate the contribution of our black people throughout the year. That is something that we all agree with, and to get to that we need to look more strongly at the issue of black education in our curriculum.

My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) mentioned Olive Morris. For years as a councillor, I used to go into that building, not knowing the great work that she pioneered, and it is important that that is celebrated and documented. We are not talking about whitewashing and erasing our history. That was in the past—yes, there is an uncomfortable past in some of the things that this country did, but it is about celebrating and recognising the contributions of great black Britons, so going forward, I hope that we can see more debate and more contributions.

This October, it would be remiss of me not to mention Nigeria. We celebrated 60 years of independence on 1 October, but we see some troubles going on in Nigeria. Myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) were out at the protest; there is a big movement at the moment, trying to end the police brutality. I am really sure, for the Nigerian diaspora in the UK, that we should celebrate their positive contribution.

3.11 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I start by paying tribute to some really fantastic speeches we have heard in this debate, including an absolutely inspirational speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) and a brilliant speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), who really brought home the point that advantages and disadvantages are characteristics of individuals, not the colour of their skin. There were some brilliant speeches—I do not always agree with the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), but I always think she speaks very well.

It is very important that people understand our history and how Britain over the decades came to be a multiracial society, as it is now. It is very important that people understand that history goes back further than we

might think. I was in a pub just north of Corby the other day, which turned out to have had Britain's first black pub landlord back in the 17th century. The history of ethnic minorities in the UK goes back a long way. It has many distinguished people in it and great contributions. From Olaudah Equiano in the 18th century, the great abolitionist, to Johnson Beharry, VC, today, people from ethnic minorities have served this country in important ways.

In my constituency, 68% of secondary school pupils are white, 23% are Asian and 3% are black, and this month, they will all be studying black history. I would like to see Black History Month evolve into something new—to become mainstreamed, not to be held off on the end of a pair of tweezers anymore, but to be forged into part of our common national story. It seems odd and alienating to me to try to single out one group at a time, because fundamentally, there is no black history. There is no white history. There is just British history.

Do not get me wrong; the story of the American civil rights movement was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer), and the story of the black civil rights struggle in America is inspirational—it has absolutely incredible figures in it and everyone should learn about it—but it is different from our story. It is important that we do not constantly import wholesale these ideas from America, like we are the 51st state of America. Our story is quite different. Black people who came to this country came not as slaves. They came here of their own choice and to work—and to work hard—often in quite difficult working-class jobs. Black people in this country do not have one story. They have many different backstories and they come from all over the world and many different cultures.

I put down that marker because sometimes I listen to this debate, and something about it just makes me wonder. I hear people talking about decolonising the curriculum, as if the curriculum of Britain's state schools is colonialist or imperialist today. This may be a generational thing, but it certainly was not when I was at a comprehensive in 1980s Huddersfield. There was a conversation about many of the bad things as well as our country's more positive history. I worry that it is part of an agenda that is part of identity politics, increasingly not seeing us as a single society—a single people—but trying to treat people primarily as members of groups. I worry about that.

There was a headteacher in Sheffield who wrote to all his parents to say that Britain is a society founded on white supremacy and white privilege. That is just not true. Apartheid South Africa was a society founded on white supremacy. The confederacy in the US was a society like that. Britain is not that society. It is incredibly damaging to young people, whether they are Asian or black, to tell them that it is, because it is a lie. I worried about that again when I was walking down Whitehall, with all the graffiti after the BLM protests, and I saw the statue of Churchill, and someone had written “was a racist” on it. Let us be clear: if it was not for that man, there would be an enormous great swastika flying from this building. I worry about the poison that the young man who wrote that had been fed, and I worry that we cannot allow Black History Month to be sucked into that. We do not want this country to be polarised into Balkanised, small groups. That would be a future very different from the one that I grew up expecting and hoping for from this country—one where we would

increasingly not see each other as members of groups, where we would increasingly be colour blind and where everyone would fit into our common culture. But I worry that the new woke agenda and identity politics are telling people that they must be on their guard at all times because Britain is a horrendously racist society, and that people cannot assimilate into society because it is completely different from—or incompatible with—them. I worry that that agenda does more to divide people than to unite them.

Britain is a country where there are still problems. There is still real racism; people suffer from real racism every day in this country. But it is also a country in which we have made huge progress. Over the last 20 years, for example, the employment rate for black men and women has not just grown, but has grown faster than the employment rate for white men and women. The gap has been closed. Median earnings in this country are highest for people of Indian backgrounds, lowest for people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, and black and white people are in the middle. Indian pupils who are on free school meals are as likely to pass their English and maths GCSEs as black pupils who are not. That is a troubling statistic, but, then again, the situation is more nuanced. For example, poor black and Asian girls who are eligible for free school meals are more likely to go to university than white and black boys who are not. There is nuance; it is literally not a story about black and white. There are important things that we have to understand in this story.

I pay tribute to the people, and I understand the great motivations behind Black History Month, and the importance of making everybody feel that they can achieve and are part of this country's story. I went to an averagely performing comprehensive in an averagely performing area. I saw how people's culture can sometimes keep them down—that people do not believe that they can do certain things. When my careers teacher asked me how many GCSEs I would pass, I said, "All of them", and he laughed. All I can say is, I hope you're watching this now! I worry that the same is even more true for young black people. It is very important that they have role models, can see the wonderful people in this House and can achieve anything they want to, but I also want this to be a unifying agenda. In the end, as I said before, there is no black history and no white history; there is just British history.

3.16 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I have listened to many interesting and good contributions, but also some that I have found slightly disappointing. I sometimes wonder whether people have quite got it yet. It is important that we have many more debates like this one, until every last person really gets it. I am not black so I do not pretend to understand what it is like to have grown up as a black person. It is therefore very important for me to hear many, many stories of people who have a different skin colour from my own, rather than having a ready opinion of what I think those people should feel like. But there we go; we need to discuss this further.

Earlier this year, the death of George Floyd and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement pushed the issue of racial injustice to the forefront of our attention. Discrimination and social injustice go hand in hand. Our society is full of discrimination, be it on sex and gender, physical or mental disability, age, religion

or income, but discrimination based on race and ethnicity continues to be the most stubborn and most politically abused. The new and growing culture war, the toxic debates about immigration over the last 10 years and the associated increase in racial hate crimes have all added to the horrible sense that we have recently gone backwards, rather than forwards.

The Black Lives Matter protests in the summer were remarkable in their global response. Painful as it was, this created a huge learning opportunity for many of us, including me. I believe in respectful dialogue between real people. I have been listening to and speaking with members of the black community in my constituency of Bath. I have heard eye-opening and moving stories from residents who have faced systemic racism for their entire lives in our city. Yes, of course there are individual exceptions, but let us listen to the majority experience of people who grow up in black communities.

The city of Bath prides itself on being open and welcoming, so I have to admit that I was shocked, surprised and ashamed by a small but vociferous minority leading an ugly backlash against a necessary and positive wake-up call. We must face up to the continuing structural racial inequalities in Britain today. We need to reject and dismantle the culture war that is being actively promoted in our society. It robs our country of humanity and compassion, and will be the death of a tolerant and liberal society, and we need actively to call it out and fight against it.

Many people remain extremely defensive about racism. It can be difficult and painful, but we must try to look at it from the perspective of others—of those who have been touched by it. The only people who can speak credibly about racism are those who have experienced it at first hand. Their lived experience is real; no one can take that away from them. Not everyone in our black community supports the idea of Black History Month. It can run the risk of becoming a superficial tick-box exercise without any tangible outcomes. We cannot condone a selective view and teaching of our nation's history—one that leaves some people out and negates and invalidates their experience. Including more rather than less in our history books can only be enriching. It means not that we eradicate history, but that we add to it to get a fuller picture of what life is and has been for more than just the white majority.

For as long as it takes our country to confront the totality of our history, including the parts that we are disturbed and ashamed about, such as slavery, Black History Month has a place in our calendars and in our consciousness. It serves as a prompt and as a reminder to focus our attention, to listen, to discuss, to learn, to reflect, to change and to measure whether we actually make any progress in eradicating racial discrimination. As I have said, I was slightly disturbed by some of the exchanges about who has done better or who has done worst, rather than recognising that we all can and must do better. There is no place for complacency here. Behind every statistic of racial injustice is a human life—a real person.

Last week, I visited Fairfield House in Bath: a place of local, national and global significance. It was the residence of the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie while he was in exile for five years before and during the second world war. The house serves as a focal point for the local black community. Elders gather every Friday

[Wera Hobhouse]

for lunch. It represents a fascinating chapter of black history and should be a source of great pride for all of us in our city, and yet it is actually quite hidden.

Our country is on a journey towards racial equality. I hope that this year will be a milestone in our shared commitment to going forward and to making genuine progress.

3.22 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I am very pleased that we are marking Black History Month, as it is an opportunity to bring to the fore the many untold stories of black Britons of African and Caribbean descent, who, for many generations, have made significant contributions to our society, but who deserve much greater recognition.

I studied history at university and published a book of social and architectural history last year, which, during the process of research, led me to conclude that there is much more to be done in exploring and paying tribute to the enormous contribution that black British people have made and continue to make in shaping our history.

Given the covid-19 pandemic, I am also very pleased that, during this Black History Month, we have been celebrating the lives of black public servants who have done so much to support and improve our country. Later this afternoon, I will be attending a meeting of the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art, of which I am a member, and we will be discussing a series of activities and initiatives to focus on improving diversity of representation and inclusivity in relation to the parliamentary art collection, as summarised in the Committee's press release of 30 September. In particular, we will be reviewing expanding the ethnic diversity within the collection and gaining a better understanding of the work that comparable experts and organisations are undertaking with their collections outside Parliament. Reinterpretation is likely to form a key part of the approach, rather than removing artworks from display, and all the discussions will be open and transparent. I hope that, over time, this will make a significant contribution to the appreciation of black history and become an important educational resource.

The national curriculum, as it stands, is inclusive and flexible, allowing teachers to teach about black, Asian and minority ethnic history. Nothing in the history curriculum is compulsory, so mandating the teaching of particular areas of history would lead to the charge that we are excluding others. Instead, teachers have the freedom and flexibility as to the focus that they want their pupils to have.

I hope that the recently announced Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities will make a major contribution to this debate, given that education is one of the key areas on which it will focus.

I applaud the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for bringing us this debate, and the hon. Members of all parties who sponsored it. I am very pleased to see it return after a five-year gap and I hope it will not be another five years before we hold another. It makes a major contribution to marking Black History Month and deepens our understanding

of how the study of history should address the past and should be taught across the UK. Above all, it reminds us and emphasises that people of all races in this country have a shared history and a shared future together.

3.25 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for securing this vitally important debate. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to people and movements that have inspired me and many others in Wales and beyond in the fight against racism.

Paul Robeson, the son of an escaped slave in America, was world renowned as an actor and singer, but above all he was a fearless political activist and campaigner for human and civil rights and equality. He developed a deep bond with the south Wales mining communities, speaking and performing in my own constituency in the 1930s. Despite being banned from leaving America during the 1950s, in the McCarthy period, he was still able to sing at the miners' eisteddfod in Porthcawl in 1957, via a transatlantic telephone link. A recording of that event, which was recently presented to me by a former National Union of Mineworkers official, sits in my constituency office. The Welsh people also added their voice to the international petition that forced the US Supreme Court to reinstate Robeson's passport in 1958.

Nelson Mandela, too, has a very special place in the heart of Welsh people. The Wales Anti-Apartheid Movement, led by the wonderful Hanef Bhamjee, campaigned vigorously for an end to racism, colonialism and apartheid. On his release from prison, Nelson Mandela visited Cardiff to receive the freedom of the city. He thanked the people of Wales for their action, saying:

"When the call for the international isolation of apartheid went out to the world, the people of Wales responded magnificently."

Mandela demonstrated the power of people and movements to bring about positive change.

We know that systemic racism persists today—the covid pandemic has exposed that. The Welsh Government's own research reveals how covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, who also suffer higher levels of deprivation. An ethnicity pay gap persists in Wales, standing at 7.5%, and the persistence of racism has recently been laid bare in Wales by the inhumane treatment of asylum seekers placed by the UK Home Office in what has been described as a facility resembling a prison camp in west Wales. In my own constituency of Cynon Valley, the tragic death of young Christopher Kapessa has led to concerns about the treatment of black people.

The message I want to get out there and share from Wales is one of hope. The Welsh Government are committed to declaring Wales a nation of sanctuary for all. The First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, accepts that entrenched inequalities exist and is committed to developing a race equality action plan by the end of the Senedd term. The Education Secretary in Wales, Kirsty Williams, has established a working group to improve the teaching of black history in our schools. In place of Black History Month in Wales, we have Black History Cymru 365, to teach and celebrate the contributions made by black people to Welsh life, history and culture throughout the year.

A great deal of positive work is taking place in my constituency of Cynon Valley. Following the horrific murder of George Floyd, Martha Thickett, a young Cynon schoolgirl, organised a Black Lives Matter “Take the Knee” protest. More than 150 people attended, which was unprecedented in my predominantly white constituency. We have now set up an anti-racist steering group in Cynon Valley and our own constituency treasurer, Mustapha Maohoub, who holds a Bernie Grant leadership award, is helping to drive that forward.

As Members can see, I am so proud of our strong anti-racist tradition in Wales, but the fight goes on. I have hope for the future, borne of my experience with Martha and many others of her generation who have put themselves forward to continue the fight for what is right. But as well as a local grassroots response, we need leadership, investment and political action from Government to turn the tide of poverty, poor health outcomes and poor employment prospects that so many of our black, Asian and minority ethnic comrades suffer and to change social attitudes, so that we all recognise each other as equal and valued human beings. *Diolch yn fawr.*

3.29 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate and to follow my Welsh colleagues, my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) and the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), who spoke so passionately and eloquently. I thank the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for securing this important debate.

Black History Month is an important opportunity to celebrate the outstanding contributions made by people of African and Caribbean descent. This time last year, I was teaching maths to disadvantaged adults, and my class was predominantly from the BAME community. I saw at first hand the challenges that the community faces. Moving to the island of Ynys Môn in north Wales, which has a very low proportion of BAME residents, came as quite a shock.

Many on Anglesey are unaware that, in the 1700s, the growth and wealth of the island was made possible through the labour of black slaves. In the late 18th century, Amlwch, in the very north of the island, played host to our equivalent of the gold rush. Copper was discovered in Parys mountain, and an Anglesey man called Thomas Williams grabbed the opportunity. Mr Williams was a nefarious entrepreneur. Realising that copper was prized by African chiefs, he used it to barter for slaves, who he brought back to Anglesey to work in the mines, where they dug out copper. By the end of the 18th century, Wales controlled half the world’s copper. Amlwch harbour grew. Its population rose from 500 to 10,000 people, and Williams became a very wealthy man. It is well worth a visit to the Amlwch Industrial Heritage Trust exhibitions at Copper Kingdom and Parys mountain to understand the huge contribution made by the BAME community to our island’s past.

In recent years, Amlwch has suffered. It has suffered massive under-investment and, although Parys mountain still has mineral deposits, it is not the open cheque book that Williams once knew. The port has been superseded by Liverpool and Holyhead and, like much of Anglesey, it is now dependent on tourism. Amlwch needs solid employment opportunities to bring back the boom times. The wind and waves that once brought ships to

Amlwch’s shores have not gone anywhere. By harnessing those renewable resources, we can turn Ynys Môn into the UK’s energy island, with projects such as Morlais marine energy, and become a hub of employment opportunities. This time, we will build back better, not with black slavery, but with opportunities for all, regardless of race, creed or colour.

3.32 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I thank my good friend the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for securing this really important debate. We have heard many powerful speeches today from Members on both sides of this House about their own proud history of being black but also, sadly, their all too familiar experience of racism.

What is clear is that while we have made strides in recent years to educate, inform and raise awareness of black history—not least since the start of Black History Month more than 30 years ago—it continues to be an ongoing struggle to highlight the oppression, racism, bias and bigotry that black people face on a daily basis in our country. Greater Manchester, where my Stockport constituency is based, has its own rich history of incredible individuals whose sacrifice and struggle led to the incremental steps in the long journey to the UK becoming a more equal society and inspired so many people to lead that same fight for this generation.

Too often, black history is little more than an afterthought in our education system, despite it being an integral part of our country’s legacy. Indeed, just last month, the education charity Teach First found that pupils could complete their GCSEs and leave secondary school without having studied a single word by a non-white author and black history being widely absent from the school curriculum. This Government must act now to right this wrong and ensure that young people learn about black British history and colonialism as well as the uncomfortable lessons of Britain’s role in the transatlantic slave trade. Schools should be at the forefront of this learning. Issues such as migration, empire and belonging are relevant not only to young people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds but to students from all backgrounds, to enable them to gain a full understanding of the varied and wide-ranging cultural inputs that have contributed to the making of Britain.

The campaigns and keystone moments that have been at the forefront of change in our country must also be taught. For example, the Bristol bus boycott of 1963 arose from the refusal of the Bristol Omnibus Company to employ black or Asian bus crews in the city. While this was in common with other cities, as there was widespread racial discrimination in housing and employment at the time, in Bristol the youth worker Paul Stephenson, among many others, alongside the West Indian Development Council, led the boycott of the company’s buses, which lasted for four months until the company backed down and overturned the colour bar. The Bristol bus boycott was considered by some to have been influential in the passing of the Race Relations Act 1965, which made racial discrimination unlawful in public spaces, and the Race Relations Act 1968, which extended the provisions to employment and housing.

It is vital that we learn from those who have led the struggle before us. For example, Greater Manchester has its own long and proud black history, notably the

[Navendu Mishra]

boxer Len Johnson, who, having been denied the opportunity to fight for championships in Great Britain because of the colour bar that existed in his sport at the time, took on his greatest battle of all—campaigning to lift the colour bar in Manchester. He died in relative anonymity in Britain but was mourned internationally as a pioneer for equality in sports. He is also remembered as a stalwart in the local Labour movement who worked to improve race relations among the city's working class.

One individual who helped to inspire me and shape my own views was Mrs Jayaben Desai. Of Indian heritage, she famously led the Grunwick dispute of mostly women workers—a landmark strike in the fight for fairness and equality in Britain, including better pay and conditions, and dignity for all workers. Mrs Desai and the Grunwick strikers shattered the stereotype of the subservient south Asian woman and brought thousands of people together to stand up for migrant workers. In a now famous speech, she said:

“We have shown that workers like us, new to these shores, will never accept being treated without dignity or respect.”

Another is the former NBA legend John Amaechi, who has been a Stockport resident and a stalwart in the battle for racial equality, speaking out regularly about the difficult experiences of growing up as a black man. Yet, as he recently pointed out, despite the progress that has been made to date, without meaningful action we are a long way from the equal society we all strive for. He summed up the challenge as follows: “I’m 50 years old. I am going to die with racism rampant. How ludicrous is that?”

Racism is a systemic problem that will require systemic solutions. Education is not enough to address racial inequalities, as we saw as recently as 2016 in a Trades Union Congress report revealing that black workers with degrees earn almost a quarter less than their counterparts. There must be interventions that directly challenge racial inequalities in the workplace. That is why this Government need a race equality strategy that sets out the vision for a thriving multicultural Britain, puts in place the concrete measures to reduce the structural inequalities faced by black people in Britain, and fundamentally changes the system and institutions where racial disparities exist.

That needs to happen urgently, but I am sure that my colleagues on this side of the House will not hold their breath while this Government are led by a Prime Minister who thinks it is perfectly acceptable to label black people “piccaninnies” with “watermelon smiles” and confesses that they make him “turn a hair”. That is a barrier to any form of progress. It is exactly the sort of racist mindset that must be stamped out if we are to truly progress as a nation, accept all those who live in our country, acknowledge their hard work and sacrifice, which has helped to give our country its prominent standing on the world stage, and stop the cycle of history repeating itself.

3.38 pm

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this debate and welcome the opportunity to speak in it. This is really important subject because the issues affect us all, as individuals and because it is important that we all

flourish together as a society. I have a master's in history, so I feel particularly engaged in the subject as a whole. It does not seem that long ago when there was something of a debate on whether we should even be teaching history at all—whether it was an important subject—so the fact that we are talking about how we should teach it is probably at least some progress.

Black History Month is a great opportunity to celebrate and learn about the history and contribution of minority ethnic groups and individuals. This year I particularly enjoyed the debate on its website about who was the first British black police officer, or even the pre-Peel equivalent—whether it was Thomas Latham in the mid-1700s, John Kent in around 1835, or indeed, other candidates who were not even mentioned by name. Though they were important as individuals, in many ways it does not matter which one was first. The point is that black and minority ethnic people have been making a positive contribution to our society for a very long time and, of course, this should be reflected in our history and in our culture.

The history of this nation is rich and it is diverse. From the Celts to the conquest, from the reformation to the restoration, from the enlightenment to empire, it is a history of conflict and peace, of intolerance and inclusion, and of enrichment and decline, and almost everything else we can think of in-between. In my experience, very few people seriously believe that our history is anything but complex both in its reality and in its legacy. The existing curriculum does empower teachers, giving them the flexibility to teach this history in all its glorious and sometimes inglorious detail and, crucially, to do that in a balanced and impartial way.

History is not a handy instruction manual for the present. It is far too simplistic to imagine that people can take the lives and beliefs of generations long dead and somehow transpose our modern values on to them. When they try, they inevitably end up trying to impose their own views and trying to use history somehow to prove the validity of their own world or their own political view. History can enlighten and educate, inform and inspire, but change happens in the present. Our power lies in the practical things we can do to make sure opportunity is shared by all, like those things this Government are actually doing, such as getting minority students achieving at school and going on to university, getting apprenticeships and having great careers with equal pay. I very much look forward to hearing from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities established by my hon. Friend the Minister.

When I walk around this Palace and especially when I sit in the Committee Rooms, I see images of men in the corridors and on the walls, but when I look at those statues and paintings, I think that that is how it was, but it is not so much like that now, and I am part of that change, thanks to opportunity and role models. Martin Luther King famously said:

“We are not makers of history; we are made by history.”

On the basis that Dr King did make history, I respectfully think he was mistaken in that respect, or maybe just too modest. I think both are actually true: we are made by history—history is what brings us all here to this point together—but we can make history. My hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) has made history, and the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) has made history.

I want to conclude with a stark warning from George Orwell. He wrote:

“The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history.”

Let us not go down that road. Those who seek to destroy rarely create something better in its place. Let us not use history to divide us, but instead honestly and openly embrace our past and celebrate our common future.

3.43 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) in this important debate.

There are those of us who are saying that black history should be part of our history and, as someone who studied history at university, I want to say something about that debate and about the way we are taught. In history, there is not a definite right and wrong. There are people who write history, and as the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford said, the tendency has been for more men to be talked about in history than women, more people who were better off and more people who were white rather than black. It is not a right and wrong: it is not a case of “This is British history, and this is what we should be teaching”. It is about making sure that all the voices from our past are heard equally. I do not think that that should be a contentious issue; it should be something we all welcome.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare)—she is an incredible Member of Parliament already, even though she has not been here very long—on securing this debate, and on her well thought-through emails instructing us all on what to do. I welcome the fact that she is definitely a completer-finisher, which is not necessarily something that we all share.

As we know, Black History Month is particularly significant this year—a year in which covid has ripped through our communities, exposing and enlarging the inequalities we knew were already there. It has been a year in which we have seen powerful protests, with the Black Lives Matter movement shining a light on those inequalities and bringing people from all backgrounds together to stand against racial injustice and fight for a better future. This month is about celebrating and recognising the contribution that great black Britons have made over many generations, and it is the time to talk about black people whose stories have been left out of the history books.

In the short time that I have, I want to honour some of the great black Britons from my town of Croydon who have made outstanding contributions. I heard a debate on the radio recently about whether we should teach black history in schools. Somebody suggested that we should teach children about the great musician Stormzy, and somebody else said, “No, we should not be talking about Stormzy. We should be looking to our past and celebrating the other great black musicians, such as the composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor.” Both are from Croydon, so I think we should celebrate them both equally.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was born in 1875, and he was the first black person to be accepted into the Royal College of Music as a violin student at 15 years old. He

was also the first black person to be a recipient of the blue plaque, which can still be seen today on his house in South Norwood. He suffered horrific racial abuse—at school, apparently, he even had his hair set on fire—but somehow he remained dignified and committed. He was a household name in the UK and in America, but neither he nor his family got money from his success, because the rights to his most famous composition were sold for a small fee.

The other great musical genius is Stormzy. I was a fan before he was famous, and I even quoted him in my maiden speech in 2017. I still have yet to meet him, and that is very unfortunate—[*Interruption.*] If he is listening, I am still trying and I will continue to try. As Members will know, Stormzy was the first UK grime artist to headline the pyramid stage at Glastonbury, but he has done so much more than his amazing music. He set up a dedicated scholarship fund to send two black UK students to Cambridge every year, and he has made a lifetime commitment to help black British causes. He announced in June that he would donate £10 million to organisations, charities and movements that are committed to fighting racial injustice and supporting justice reform and black empowerment in the UK. Although we celebrate those influential and outstanding black Britons, it is a bittersweet reminder that Stormzy felt that he had to set up such a system to ensure that others do not face the barriers that he has faced.

Black history is British history and must be included in the school curriculum, as I have mentioned. We must learn the good and the bad about our past and ask questions about those we celebrate. In my constituency, we have a conservation area of streets called the East India conservation area, and since the Black Lives Matter movement we have been asking questions in Croydon about the history of the East India Company and whether it is appropriate for us to have such names. I think we would all accept, however, that change is about more than the name of a street; it is about the systemic nature of racism in our country and what we can do about it.

I wanted to mention a member of my team who has always lived in Croydon. She is very young and only joined me recently. When she was at school, she felt frustrated by what she saw as the whiteness of her school’s curriculum, so she set up her own weekly sessions where all students could go to learn about and debate issues that affected students from African and Caribbean backgrounds. Esther is amazing, and I am lucky to have her in my team. There are many other amazing black Britons I could talk about. Callton Young is a councillor in Croydon. He was the first ever black senior civil servant in the Home Office 20 years ago, and he is still the only black person to have been a senior civil servant in the Home Office.

I will jump to the end and quote Croydon’s first poet laureate, who is a young black woman called Shaniqua Benjamin. She has recently written a poem that says:

“We can’t go back.

Back to a normal that was,

a canvas painted over to start afresh

spilling love and goodness onto new turf

creating a brighter scene where all survive”.

3.49 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) and the many excellent speeches in what has been a pretty good-natured debate so far. I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this debate, along with her colleagues.

It is wonderful that time in the main Chamber has been given to debate Black History Month. It is an opportunity to celebrate the contribution of black people to our history, with a particular focus this year on public services. I particularly acknowledge the contribution of our BAME community to the national response to covid, especially those who work in our NHS. We are grateful for their service and their sacrifice.

One of the petitions relevant to today's debate is about teaching Britain's colonial past in schools. The hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) and others have called for our history to be decolonised. I recognise our difficult colonial past, but there are positives, too. As a proud colonial, I stand here today to highlight my own history, which I would not want to see rewritten or whitewashed. In the 1851 census, my great-great-grandfather, Levi Stanton, is recorded, aged 13, as a chimney sweep in Lincolnshire. In 1883, he boarded the Rangitikei with his family, including my very young great-great-grandfather, who nearly did not survive the journey. He took an enormous risk to find a better life for his family. That is not a unique story—it is a global story—and it is not limited to race, gender or class. He was part of building his country, New Zealand, by laying drains and being a member of the voluntary fire brigade. What does that mean for me, five generations later? A childhood in a rich, diverse melting pot of culture in economically challenged west Auckland.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) said that black people have the best music—I agree. My musical heroes of the '80s and '90s came from the US and the UK, and many were black. I spent hours in my bedroom as a teenager trying to sound like Whitney Houston or Sade and singing along to Stevie Wonder and Boyz II Men—I am afraid I am probably showing my age. The moment when I really felt like I had made it and felt most included as a teenager was when my Maori and Pacific Island friends let me sing with them. Everyone is looking to feel like they belong, regardless of gender or social class, and enjoying culture and music is a fine way to achieve that inclusion.

I am now a British citizen and a Member of Parliament—a journey from chimney to Chamber—and I am regularly asked by women out there who my female role models are. Without fail, I always mention Rosa Parks, and I am pleased that children in key stage 1 have the opportunity to learn about her. History tells us the impact of her actions on the civil rights movement. I see a woman who, in a moment, exercised great courage and strength of will against a gross injustice. She was a hero.

Today, let us remember our black heroes of history and our current heroes, including right hon. and hon. Members in this place, and let us work together to create equality of opportunity for us all as we continue to build our nation of tolerance and respect for those to come.

3.53 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for securing this long-overdue debate. It is my honour to speak in this debate as the first black MP for Coventry North West and as the first MP of Nigerian heritage in the west midlands—as my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) said, I hope not to be the only one.

We should celebrate black history all year round, not just in October. I look forward to many more discussions, debates and celebrations of black history on the Floor of the House. I want to take this moment to celebrate Coventry's black history. According to the most recent census figures, black people made up 3.4% of the Coventry North West constituency—that is thousands of people making brilliant contributions to our culture, our economy and our thriving communities.

In a nod to black people's contribution to Coventry's arts and cultural heritage, I pay tribute to the pioneer Ira Aldridge, who broke racial barriers by being the first black actor to play Othello in Shakespeare's notable play. Ira contributed immensely to Coventry's cultural heritage by becoming Britain's first black theatre manager. Offstage, he was a prominent anti-slavery activist, performing in and directing anti-racism plays and mobilising citizens in Coventry to sign public anti-slavery petitions. He was a world-renowned black actor who found a home in Coventry, and in doing so he secured our reputation for theatrical excellence.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the fact that Coventry is a trailblazer for British music. We are the city that created 2 Tone, an era-defining fusion of Jamaican ska, punk rock and new wave music. Did hon. Members know that Chuck Berry recorded his only No. 1 hit, "My Ding-A-Ling", live in Coventry? *[Interruption.]* Perhaps they did, but it does not hurt to remind them once again. I say all that, because I am proud of my constituency's brilliant contribution to black British history. Today, I want everyone to know about Ira, 2 Tone, and Coventry's long history of black brilliance. Our status as UK City of Culture 2021 has galvanised us to celebrate black history in Coventry, and I hope that we continue to do so—not just today, not just for this month, but for years to come. I believe that that history should be taught in our schools.

Black history is British history. This year, Black History Month gives us a much-needed moment to reflect. 2020 has been a year of upheavals. Throughout the pandemic, there has been a call to action against racial injustice, and with Black Lives Matter in the UK and abroad, we have been forced to take stock of our failures as a nation. This is a pivotal moment for us to address societal ills against black people, to recognise that black history is British history, and to ensure that that history is woven into our schools curriculum.

The Macpherson report and the Windrush lessons learned review both underline the need for black history to be disseminated across the UK: they urge us to take pride and value black British history, to prevent racism and better to reflect the needs of a diverse society. At a time when polls from HOPE not hate indicate that the British public are ready for a more progressive debate on racism in the UK, now is the time for change.

Does the Minister not agree that black people's refusal to accept injustice and prejudice is awe inspiring? Will she finally agree to get the Government to commit to working with anti-racist organisations and other key stakeholders to conduct a review to diversify the curriculum so that it is fully reflective of modern British history?

3.57 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): As has become traditional in opening, I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) and those who sponsored her application on securing today's debate. As a member of the Backbench Business Committee, I commend her on the way in which she put her application together and pitched it. It was not hard for us to agree to the debate—we did so unanimously—and to fast-track it so that it could take place in the Chamber in October.

The hon. Lady was entirely right to say that we should commemorate the contributions and achievements of black Britons in our country's history. Those contributions are many and varied in the arts, entertainment, culture, politics and current affairs. I would like to discuss black British contributions to the world of sport. That is not to trivialise those contributions at all. Sport is often a cultural leader—where sport goes, society often follows. Sport touches a mass audience in a way that other activities cannot match.

I admit that from an early age I have been a sportaholic. Growing up as a child in the late 1970s and 1980s, black British role models were plentiful. Daley Thompson and Tessa Sanderson, for example, were household names for their heroics in the Olympic games in the early 1980s, as was Frank Bruno, for his achievements in and out of the boxing ring. Chris Oti was an electric presence on the wing of the England rugby union team, and Ellery Hanley and Martin Offiah were even more dominant in rugby league. As a fanatical—and somewhat disappointed, these days—Manchester United fan, I idolised the exploits of players such as Viv Anderson, Remi Moses, Paul McGrath and Danny Wallace.

More recently, on 11 August 2012, I had the pleasure of being with my family among 80,000 people in Hyde Park, watching on a big screen as Mo Farah won the 5,000 metres to complete an historic Olympic double. Seeing tens of thousands of people of all backgrounds cheering themselves hoarse and jumping for joy to celebrate the awesome achievement of a man who emigrated to this country from war-torn Somalia when he was a child was one of the most unifying things that I have ever witnessed. The sight of him draped in the Union flag during his lap of honour was an especially poignant sight.

Sport is one field among many in which black Britons have made great contributions to our country. That is why Black History Month is so important, but it is equally important that it is not hijacked by those with a political agenda who wish to sow division. There have recently been disturbing noises in certain quarters from political activists who wish to attack British history, British tradition, British culture and British institutions. For example, recently attempts have been made to sully the reputations of towering figures in British history because the views of their time do not necessarily conform to today's values.

It is certainly true that history can be debated and can be interpreted in different ways, but it would be wholly wrong to attempt to rewrite our history to indoctrinate children with anti-British propaganda and to impose an ideological world view. These moves are dangerous; they will do nothing for inclusiveness. Instead, they will foster bitterness and resentment on all sides.

We must not go down this route; instead, as my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) said at the beginning of this debate, let us celebrate our commonality. Let us have more Mo Farah moments. Let us use Black History Month to celebrate the achievement of black Britons and bring people together across the country, not force them apart.

4.1 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): While looking into Black History Month within my constituency, I discovered that John Edward Parris was one of the first, if not the first, black footballer for Bradford. More recently, Ces Podd and Joe Cooke can be added to the famous names associated with Bradford and football. I am also pleased to have seen more recently the appointment of our first black female CEO, Therese Patten, to the local NHS district care trust.

However, I was disheartened to learn that we do not have a place locally in which we can find details of the first black nurse, the first black teacher, the first black doctor and so forth. In contributing to today's debate, for which I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), I want to highlight that issue, but also ensure that that will change through intervention.

Many colleagues from across the House have made powerful contributions, and I echo much of what has been said, certainly on this side of the House, especially on the Black Lives Matter movement. However, I want to focus my speech on celebrating the contributions of black people across my constituency, because for black lives to really matter their contributions must be remembered, dignified and celebrated. I would take up all afternoon if I mentioned everybody, but I am going to highlight a few.

Since 1 October 2014 in my constituency a flag has been raised to mark Black History Month. I spoke to one of the organisers, a dear friend of mine, Carol Peltier, who runs the Black Health Forum. She has worked in the community for over 25 years, and she and others have been working on recording contributions. I would like to put on record my thanks for the work she is doing.

I want to say thank you to some who are no longer with us and make sure that this House recognises the people of my constituency. I am talking about the contributions of people such as the following: the late Nathaniel Johnson, otherwise known as Maas Arthur, founder of Bradford's first organisation of African-Caribbean senior citizens in the early 1980s, which is still going today; Aubury Deen, who set up the first black workers support group in Bradford Council; Bobsie Robinson, who ran culture and arts in Bradford; Joseph Flerin and Max Prosper, who helped set up a Bradford West Indian parents association for Saturday schools and the first ever nursery for black children, and also played a part in setting up the Dominica Association in my constituency, along with Maurice

[Naz Shah]

Celaire; Corine Campbell, a legendary name in my constituency in Bradford, who ran the community development unit and was a huge community activist and instrumental in setting up MAPA. While MAPA was not in my constituency, many of my constituents certainly accessed it.

I also want to give a big shout out—this is very personal to me—for the late Mikey Roots for his contribution to the local music scene, running Palm Cove just down the road from me. Mikey was a little guy with a big personality, a big heart and an even bigger presence, much bigger even than his long dreadlocks. The late Paul Joseph was also a key figure in the Bradford entertainment scene.

I would also like to talk about the political history of Bradford. It would be remiss of me not to mention what the Northern Complainants Aid Fund did. It was involved as early as 1978-79 in the case of George Lindo. The campaign started in Bradford. He was a Bradfordian man, and the case impacted on the idea of all-white juries. NCAF, and in particular Courtney Hay and Erskine Grant, also represented Carol Bonehill from Birmingham, a young mother who infamously received a P45 in the card congratulating her on the birth of her daughter. That case was represented in Bradford and it led to the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry launching a national investigation into pregnancy and discrimination. People from my constituency have impacted on laws made in this House for the betterment of society.

I put on record my thanks to a couple of organisations in particular that have done a huge amount of work. More recently, they are the Windrush Generation, which is run by Nigel Guy, the Dominica Association, the Black Health Forum, the Mary Seacole Centre in my constituency and Frontline, which is also in my constituency. I give huge thanks to Delroy Dacres, who still works tirelessly in Manningham Mills, bringing people together through sports. George Deen, who has retired, has fought really hard in Bradford for people with disabilities. Rev. George Williams has invited me to his church of St Peter's in Allerton this Christmas. Lots of people from local black churches do a huge amount in my community, especially through covid and stressful periods such as this.

On a lighter note, brothers Chris and Floyd Peltier ran the New Edition nightclub, which is infamous and remembered across the country. Floyd still runs the "All Stars of Comedy", which has a national reach celebrating black comedy. I give a quick shout out to Owen Williams, although he is not in Bradford anymore, and Trish Cooke. They are Bradfordians, and "Made in Bradford" is a badge I would like to honour them with. Owen Williams is a Bradford lad who is now the CEO of the neighbouring Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust. Trish Cooke is a black woman from Bradford who is now a leading writer of children's books and TV drama.

In closing, I simply say this: Bradford is a better place because of its diversity, and if we really mean it when we say "Black Lives Matter", it cannot be without the history of black contribution to places such as Bradford and beyond.

4.7 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), particularly because she reeled off so many names of those who have contributed so much to her constituency. I find it interesting listening to her, because I represent a part of the country—the county of East Sussex—where perhaps I would not be able to do that, because of our demographics. None the less, I feel moved to speak, because it is important for all constituents who feel the burning desire of justice to have all their representatives speak up. We should not just have certain voices speaking; we should all speak and speak up for our constituents who are very concerned. They want to celebrate Black History Month and the achievements that the community has made, but they also push us all in this place to do more. Those are really the sentiments that I come here to speak for.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this very important debate. Last time, we secured a debate together on aviation. It is a delight to be here to support her again. I apologise for coming here a little late. I was chairing a Select Committee meeting, but I wanted to be here, rather than just say, "I can't do two things at once", because it is vital that we use our voices here to show our support.

During the recent controversies that we saw in terms of the Black Lives Matter movement, what moved me were a lot of young people, particularly in my constituency, who wanted change. Perhaps some of them felt that they were not negatively impacted, but they believed in justice for their fellow students and their fellow people around the country, and they expect their representatives to do more for them. After writing to them all, a number were still not satisfied with what I was doing. I talked about what I had done in the past before I became an MP, working with youth groups in inner-city London to try and make things better and working to combat knife crime, but ultimately it was a question of, "What have you really done to celebrate the cause in Parliament?" The answer was, "Well, actually, I haven't really, because we haven't really had the opportunities to do so in Parliament." Nothing was going to stop me being here this afternoon to make my voice heard on behalf of the constituents who expect better when it comes to equality and justice and who would perhaps agree that we have made great strides compared with when I or my parents were younger, but that there is still a long way to go.

Complacency is the root of all evil. If we tell ourselves that everything is fantastic when so many people are subject to prejudice and are being held back, and their talents are not being harnessed, quite frankly, we are not doing our job properly in this place. I want to see everyone do that. I know that the Minister has that passion as well and will do so, and I want my Government to do more.

I want to touch on the controversy of history. I am a firm believer that we learn from history only if we evaluate it and re-evaluate it, but not if we eradicate it. I hope that we will reflect on that. My predecessor from 200 years ago was a somewhat controversial figure. He did some good—he was a sponsor of Michael Faraday, provided money for the Royal Institution and campaigned

for the pauper's badge to be taken down—but he was also a supporter of slavery and made his money from slavery at a time when that had become unacceptable even in this place. He is without doubt a controversial figure who should be looked at in terms of the bad that he did as well.

In my constituency, a number of monuments have been left to my predecessor, and the big debate is whether we should let them crumble. In my view, we should not. We should make sure that they are there so that we can have a good debate and discussion with young people who can come out and see what was done, what was controversial and what was wrong at his time. If we allow them to crumble and fall, we will never, ever be able to shine a light on the bad things that people in this place did and that were done in history. I very much hope that we can perhaps rebrand monuments and statues and look at them differently to explain the bad that came from some of those who went before us, but that we will not eradicate history, because otherwise we will never learn from it.

4.12 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this important debate. I count myself privileged having grown up in the east end of London and then, like many communities, having moved further out towards the constituency that I now live in and represent.

My upbringing was shaped by diversity. I was lucky to go to school with pupils from a wide range of backgrounds, but predominantly white working-class or Bangladeshi communities. I was lucky to go to an inner-city state school here in London, just up the road, where children were drawn from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, but particularly black African and Caribbean communities. That made me not only entirely comfortable with the diversity of our country, but actively welcome it. I really feel that I benefited from an education that exposed me to people from a wide range of backgrounds, faiths and cultures. We cannot understand what it is to be human unless we understand the diversity of humanity and different human experiences; that is the whole purpose of education.

If I may say so, some of the debate around black history, whether in this Chamber or out in the country, only serves to underline the shortcomings of our history curriculum. From some contributions, it might be thought that people had never read English or British history, that black history is something else, or that, even more bizarrely, talking about Britain's imperial, colonial past is somehow rewriting history.

Having been educated in some great state schools in this city and in diverse communities, I do not recall even being told about that history, yet it is a central part of our island story, of explaining the diversity of the country that we are today, and of understanding the strength of our international, bilateral and multilateral relationships. We should be more confident about the country that we are today so that we can confront some of the darkneses of our own past.

Why are we as a country so insecure about ourselves and our identity that we feel we lose something by telling an accurate story about our country's island past? We do not lose anything from that. I do not feel

that I lose anything, as a white working-class British kid, English kid, Londoner, from hearing the stories of other people's journeys to this country. When we look at the story of disadvantage in our country today, particularly educational disadvantage, and at the over-representation of minority communities, particularly black communities, in our criminal justice system or in low pay or underemployment, we find that these are entirely entrenched with existing baked-in inequalities in our country, which we understand from a deeper understanding of our past. We cannot correct these injustices and put our country on a path to a better future unless we fully understand how we got to where we are today.

There are plenty of inspirational stories to tell, but if we are serious about educating out prejudice and about raising ambitions and aspirations, it is important that we tell the whole story. It is important that people see role models from backgrounds such as theirs. That is one reason I was proud to be working, before being elected to this House, for one of the country's leading LGBT rights organisations, Stonewall, on exactly this issue, so that children growing up can understand the diversity of the country and world they are living in and might see role models of the kind of people they want to grow up to be, whether business leaders, politicians—God forbid—creatives or entrepreneurs. This is also true for black, Asian and other ethnic minority communities, who too often go through our education system without seeing themselves and their own family stories reflected in the curriculum they are taught. How can that be right?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman refers to what he was taught when he was young, but is he aware of what is taught in the curriculum today? It seems as though he is talking about a completely different curriculum from that which children today are being taught. Does he not know of any of the modules that cover these issues?

Wes Streeting: I am so grateful to the Minister for that question, because, after my slight rant, it brings me back to the issue I wanted to talk about, which is schools. In 2008, the last Labour Government said that black history should be made compulsory within the curriculum, but let us look at what we see today. Of the 59 GCSE history modules available from the three biggest exam boards, Edexcel, AQA and OCR, just 12 explicitly mention black history—only five mention the history of black people in Britain, and the rest are about black people in the US, other countries or the transatlantic slave trade. Only up to 11% of GCSE students in 2019 were studying modules that made any reference to the contribution of black people in British history. No modules in the GCSE syllabus for the most popular exam board, Edexcel, mentioned black people in Britain. A survey of more than 55,000 people conducted by Impact of Omission found that 86.2% learned about the Tudors, 72.1% learned about the battle of Hastings and 72.6% learned about the great fire of London, whereas barely a third, 36.6%, learned about the transatlantic slave trade, 9.9% learned about the role of slavery in the British industrial revolution and 7.6% learned about the British colonisation of Africa. I just do not think that that is an accurate reflection or a proper telling of our history.

[Wes Streeting]

Of course history is contested and education is a battle of ideas, but why are we so afraid of just telling the story, letting history be what it is and giving young people the critical capacity to draw their own conclusions? That is where we have to get to, and it is a matter of great regret that in 2020 the Department for Education said that teachers

“can include black voices and history as a natural part of lessons in all subjects”.

It was not “must” but “can”—“should” would be nice. Just saying that they should do so would be an improvement, but I would prefer it to be “must”.

Finally, I wish to single out one of my heroes, as I do not think she has been mentioned. I refer to Baroness Valerie Amos, who was the first black woman in government; the first black woman in the Cabinet; the first black woman to be the Leader of either of the Houses of Parliament; the first black Lord President of the Council; the first black woman vice-chancellor—of SOAS, the School of African and Oriental Studies—in 2015; and the first black person to be master of an Oxford college, in 2020. What I find so remarkable about Valerie’s experiences is not that she is the first or that she is a trailblazer, because that should come as no surprise to any of us; what does surprise me is that it took a black woman in this country so long to get to where so many other black woman doubtless should have been. That is the story of the country we are today. Let us be proud of our history, but let us tell it properly, educate future generations and learn from the worst of our history to shape the best British future.

4.19 pm

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my friend the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). I feel like I have stepped back in time. I have known him for about 15 years. Thirteen years ago, he was the National Union of Students president, and his passion certainly has not been reduced in any way. He practises what he preaches, and it was a pleasure to hear his “rant”, to use his own word.

I want to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who spoke about the importance of standing up and contributing to this conversation. I am someone who is passionate about tackling injustices and prejudices wherever we find them, and it is vital that everyone is involved in this conversation.

Of course, I must come to the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), who gave an incredibly impressive and strong opening speech, in which she listed many outstanding people of colour whom we are celebrating. She did miss one—and I am a little disappointed that my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) got in there first on the sporting references. The hon. Lady missed Ian Wright, who was my absolute hero as a young child growing up in Doncaster. I was obsessed by him. I remember getting his biography as a kid and reading everything about him and understanding everything that he overcame—all the difficulties, injustices and racism that he faced. He remains a hero to this day, although I think he owes me an awful lot of money for making me a lifelong Arsenal fan; I have suffered because of that.

The hon. Lady also spoke of those who “barely get a voice” in Parliament. I wanted to come back to that point, because it really resonated with me. There is a broader point to be made about that subject, and I think that it actually transcends race and speaks a lot more to class, occupation and educational standards. As Members of Parliament, we have to have empathy with many different situations and backgrounds. Any hard-working MP who deals regularly with casework will know that in this job we are given responsibility and many different requests, but unfortunately, we are not always given the magic wands to make all those problems go away.

I am proud to be a member of a new intake that better represents the constituencies that I am familiar with in the north of the country, but I am also incredibly proud to be a Member of a House of Commons that is continually becoming more diverse and representing the country that we all recognise and I believe we all love. There is certainly more that we can do, but we must not lose sight of how far we have come and how many brilliant people there are on all the Benches in this Chamber who represent many different walks of life.

Today’s debate is about changing the curriculum. Every time I come into the Chamber, there seems to be a request that something should or should not be taught. We place tremendous strain on our education system with our requests, and I worry that sometimes we do not take a more holistic view of the impact that that can have on teachers.

There is a wider conversation to be had about education—about where the arms of the state end and parental responsibilities begin and about the importance of ensuring that our history is not locked away or torn down. I believe that flies in the face of the petitions that we are debating, which call for us to learn more and to educate ourselves, but we cannot always rely on the classroom to solve every issue.

Indeed, I would argue that the most important role that the classroom can play is to equip the next generation of children, from whatever background, to be prepared for the workforce and to ensure that, as always, education is the great equaliser. I believe that it is working. We have record numbers of black students attending university and record grades for black students at schools across the country. We are discussing our history today, but we must not lose sight of our present and our future.

One of the petitions that we are debating states:

“Now, more than ever, we must turn to education and history to guide us.”

Britain has a long and complicated history. The values that our country proudly promotes today, of tolerance, equality of opportunity and a multicultural and multiracial society living cheek by jowl, are the result of centuries of wrongs being righted—of enlightenment and better thinking being victorious over prejudices and ill-informed decisions. We have progressed as a society because we have learned from our mistakes.

No person, country or institution is perfect; we have made and will continue to make mistakes. To be proud of our history is not to support racism, and to love our country is not to say that it has always been right. Equally, to focus on the mistakes of our history and not highlight the progress that has been made is to give only one side of the discussion.

I have just realised that I am running out of time, so I will edit out a paragraph in real time. We are, I believe, a tolerant nation. I join colleagues from across the House in highlighting the amazing contributions that black men and women have made to our armed forces, our NHS, our businesses, our politics and our culture. I hope that young men or women watching this debate know that we are better than previous generations, but we still have more to learn.

4.26 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this important debate. It is an honour to speak in it at a time when Black History Month is more important than ever. Across the world, racism and the far right are on the rise, yet we have also seen the largest mobilisation of peaceful global anti-racist protests in decades in the form of the inspiring Black Lives Matter movement. At this crucial juncture, it has never been more important for us to learn from the history of racial oppression and end the injustices that exist to this day. The scourge of institutional racism continues to affect us in all walks of life, from the police's use of force to the disproportionate number of black children sadly going to bed hungry.

The Windrush scandal was an unacceptable travesty in which black British residents were denied their basic legal rights. Yet, to our shame, it has been revealed that in the 18-month Windrush compensation scheme, the Home Office paid out just £1.3 million across 168 cases, which accounts for just 11% of claims lodged since April 2019. The official inquiry into the scandal concluded that it was caused by institutional failures to understand race and racism. If recent events are anything to go by, the Government still have not learned any lessons from the scandal. During the Black Lives Matter movement, we have rightly seen renewed calls for our schools to teach the true brutal history of the British empire and the legacy of imperialism, colonialism, slavery and racism, which continue to have a generational impact today.

As we reflect in the wake of the brutal police killings of George Floyd and many others, it is crucial to recognise that the United Kingdom has been central to the historical subjugation of African Americans. It is estimated that Britain transported 3.1 million Africans—about 25% of slaves—to its colonies. When slavery was abolished—so-called—in 1807, Britain provided 46,000 slave owners with today's equivalent of £17 billion in reparations. The British Government paid off their obligations to former slave-owning families and organisations only in 2015. Therefore, until then, black British taxpayers were paying to compensate those who imprisoned our ancestors.

The brutality of modern racism cannot be separated from that history. Yet still I stand here today, and there will be many watching, through my eyes, my treatment as a black woman. Despite the inequalities and blatant racism we continue to face to this day, it is crucial for black young people in particular to be proud and to celebrate our history and our unique contribution to civilisation, as well as the many discoveries and inventions made by black people. To know one's identity and from where one comes is such an important legacy. For black children and young people, it would mean so much more, for they are being denied a proud and true legacy.

There is much we can be proud of. Many crucial inventions and discoveries were made by black people in the earliest civilisations. From the Kingdom of Kush to ancient Egypt, black people played a pivotal role in advancing human civilisation. We come from a people who built the pyramids so precisely, and to this day, with all the modern technology at our disposal, no one can replicate that. We should be proud of Charles Drew, who invented the blood bank, and of Dr Daniel Hale Williams, who performed the first open heart surgery. The first home security system was co-invented by Marie van Brittan Brown, and the first traffic light was invented by Garrett Morgan. The most used microphone was co-invented by James E. West, and the carbon lightbulb filament was invented by Lewis Latimer.

We should know that Britain is our country. We were here from the beginning. We can trace ourselves back 10,000 years or more to the first inhabitants of the British Isles. Our role is not to look in the mirror and simply replicate what we see. We are not here to bequeath a future worse than that which was bequeathed to us. Our role is to look in the mirror and correct what we see. Black history reminds us of who we are and from where we came, but our role is to make history. Let us resolve for our proud history to be taught all year round, and let us fight for a fairer future in which this important month will no longer be necessary. Let us transform Black Lives Matter into an everyday reality.

4.31 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Black History Month was first celebrated in October 1987. It was organised initially through the outstanding leadership of the Ghanaian analyst Akyaaba Addai-Sebo. He was the co-ordinator of special projects for the Greater London Council, and he has left a powerful legacy today. For the avoidance of doubt, it is right that we should celebrate black history as we should celebrate our history in all its forms. The need for brevity prevents me from even scratching the surface of the many brilliant contributions made by members of the BME community, so I would like, if I may, to focus on a number of key areas.

As of March 2020, 8.2% of all police officers in the UK are BME. One year ago, that figure was 7.8%, so there has been an increase. In the Metropolitan police, 16% of officers identify today as BME, with 17% of those classified as black or black British. In the City of London police, 22% of its joiners are classified as BME this year. That is excellent, as the police forces that we entrust to keep us safe are increasingly reflective of the communities they represent, and increasingly reliant on policing by consent. Long may this continue and contribute to our history.

Having spent many years in uniform, perhaps nobody is better placed than I to understand fully the fine contribution that BME communities have made to our armed forces. Some 11.7% of those who entered UK regular and reserve forces in the 12 months to 31 March 2020 were BME, and in April 8.8% of our total forces were deemed to be BME. That is up from 7.8% last year, with approximately 15,000 personnel proudly serving in uniform across regular and reserve forces. Fifty-three years ago, there were 212 Fijians in the UK armed

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forces. Now, there are 1,460. It is the same powerful story for foreign and Commonwealth soldiers right across the globe, all of whom have played their full part in the defence of our nation, not least in world war one, world war two and since.

Perhaps one of the most famous of all BME officers was Walter Tull. Not only was he among the first Afro-Caribbean infantry officers in the British Army; he was also the first in his professional football club, Northampton Town, to enlist at the outbreak of world war one. He rose to lance sergeant and fought at the Somme before being commissioned as a second lieutenant. It is alleged, too, that he was put forward for a Military Cross after leading a night-raiding party that crossed fast-flowing rapids on the Italian front. Tragically, he was killed in action in the first battle of Bapaume on 25 March 1918, during Germany's spring offensive, and his body was never recovered. He posthumously received the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. He was the first British-born black Army officer to lead white British troops into battle, and the first of many since; lest we ever forget. We have seen so many BME soldiers and officers rightly awarded the Military Cross and Victoria Cross—most recently, Johnson Beharry, who needs no introduction and deserves our utmost admiration, as does every member of the BME community who has contributed so much right across every part of our society.

In the short time I have left, I would like to sound a note of caution. Inasmuch as we are here, rightly, to celebrate Black History Month, it is also incumbent on us in this place to ensure that our national curriculum does not become hostage to those who simply want to airbrush our history from our consciousness. The secret to success with our all-important diversity and inclusion agenda lies in good education, dialogue, mutual respect, wider acceptance of our past failings and tolerance, not in imposing views that may not be reflective of the majority in the UK.

Now is not the time for apologists, anti-colonialists or emerging wokeness to attack a curriculum that is already fit for purpose. Yes, it is right that we should teach our colonial past at school, but making this compulsory may be one step too far, as it is from our history that we voluntarily learn. By the same token, tearing down statues is unlikely to generate wider support. Yes, some of our national figures may have done or said things that we now find deeply offensive, but they do play a key role in teaching us about our past—with all its faults—and in fostering a dialogue that demands nuance and balance, rather than hate.

In the same way, it is clear that our so-called contested heritage at all National Trust, Heritage England and other historical sites has a role in both educating and guiding the future. The same is true of other national institutions—such as the last night of the proms—which should be respected for what they are, not for what they are not. Seeking to reinforce this vague notion of white privilege in our society, or whitewashing those from our history who might not be to our taste today, is no way to manage our curriculum; I urge the House to be cautious. Let us celebrate Black History Month as we absolutely should.

4.37 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. [Interruption.] Ah, the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) has returned to the Chamber; I congratulate her on securing this vital debate. It was a genuine pleasure to hear the passion and pride with which she spoke as she opened the debate earlier. I thank her for ensuring that we have had this debate. I think it is the first time that we have debated Black History Month in this place for five years.

Madam Deputy Speaker, do you know that really frustrating feeling when you want to find a book, but cannot remember the title or the author? That is where I have been today: racking my brain and googling furiously to find the name of a book that I borrowed from Inverurie public library when I was about nine years old. If anyone remembers the name of this book, let me know—write in! It was about a boy who somehow manages to go back in time to early 18th-century Britain and who falls in with a young African kid—a slave who has been transported from his home to the United Kingdom. This book—I really wish I could remember its name—stuck with me because it was the first time I had ever come across the idea that someone could be thought of as lesser than or enslaved to somebody else simply by virtue of their skin colour or place of origin. As a nine-year-old, I simply could not understand it. It really affected me and sticks with me today.

I grew up in 1990s and early noughties semi-rural north-east Scotland, about as far removed from the upbringing of the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) as it is possible to get. I grew up in Inverurie, a town of about 10,000 people, and we had one BME child in my primary school of about 250 pupils. I remember the excitement when a young girl from Thailand joined our class in primary 7 and the incredibly ignorant but entirely understandable questions asked about her home by kids brought up in what I admit was a very sheltered and comfortable environment—Ome, if you are watching this, please forgive us.

I was lucky. I had brilliant teachers and parents who encouraged me to read and ask questions. In secondary school, Inverurie Academy, my history teacher, Mr Anderson—that teacher that everybody has; the legend—taught with an enthusiasm and dry wit that was infectious, using his broken golf putter to point to places on his already very out-of-date map. It was in Mr Anderson's history class, and because of his teaching, that I began to have a real understanding and appreciation of the fight for civil rights in the deep south of the United States of America, of Rosa Parks, John Lewis and Martin Luther King, and of the fight for equal citizenship. I remember being so inspired by the "I have a dream" speech that I managed to get a CD of great speeches of American leaders, and I listened to it so often on my portable CD player that I wore it down.

I remember being sickened at the images of lynchings in Mississippi, Tennessee and Georgia and how people in my parents' lifetime—people who looked and lived like me—could treat other people differently simply because of the colour of their skin. I remember asking, as someone who loved and still loves the United States, how a great country founded on the principle that all

men are created equal could send young black men to fight and die for freedom in Europe but not allow them freedom and equality at home.

We are not America. We have a very different history in this country, which others have touched on, but my point is that education—teaching—is so important. It challenges, it forces us to question, it takes us out of our comfort zone, and it informs. That is why Black History Month is very important, and it is a shame that this is the first time we have debated it in five years.

It is very good that the Government have an inclusive and flexible curriculum, teaching kids more about Britain's role in the slave trade, for example, but also about its role—the role of people in this place and of the Royal Navy—in the eventual abolition. Britain was the first and only imperial power to vote money, men and resources to ending the barbaric and inhuman trade in life that cities such as Glasgow and Bristol grew rich on the back of. I am glad that, because of the flexible curriculum, black, Asian and minority ethnic history can be taught across many of the themes of the history curriculum by reflecting the contribution of black, Asian and minority ethnic people across the ages in the UK and more widely.

One of the petitions relevant to the debate is e-petition 324092, entitled “Teach Britain's colonial past as part of the UK's compulsory curriculum”. I do not have a problem with that. In fact, I would encourage it—especially in Scotland, where time and again we pass over our colonial history. I have heard in this place that Scotland will somehow become the 60-somethingth country to wrest itself from imperial Britain's evil clutches, as if we had nothing to do with colonialism and the empire and Scots were not themselves colonialists, traders, governors, plantation owners, soldiers, sailors and missionaries.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Does the hon. Member accept that there are many people involved in the independence movement who make documentaries and are banging the drum to say that Scotland's role in the slave trade has been overlooked? We want people in Scotland to be aware of it.

Andrew Bowie: Absolutely. There are people in the independence movement and the Unionist movement who would say exactly the same thing: we need to have an honest and robust debate about our history, good and ill. I agree with the hon. Member.

We should teach about our colonial past in schools. We should examine our past critically. We should examine why empire existed in the first place, how it came to pass that a quarter of the globe was under British rule, why European powers vied with one another in the race for Africa, why family of mine and so many other normal Scots found themselves working for a colonial administration in the Indian subcontinent—so much so that at one point, seven out of 10 colonial administrators in India were Scottish—and why Glasgow was the second city of empire.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) said, in Scotland we should front up and accept the fact that we were very much at the forefront of exploration, expansion, invention and, at times, exploitation. We must do that in a rational, sensible and mature fashion. We do not learn by cancelling history, renaming tower blocks, removing statues and covering

up museum displays. In short, we should not hide our history away, for that is what it is—history. It is incredibly complicated because it is written by us—human beings—and human beings are incredibly complicated. Very few people were all good or all bad. Rather, individuals in history, just like us, were human and shaped by their understanding of the world as they found it, their lived experiences and their education.

While acknowledging the wrongs of the past, we should seek to explain, understand and explore and build a better, more understanding future—one built not on guilt, but on a mutual understanding that history means different things to different people. Just like that book I still cannot remember the name of taught me when I was nine years old, and just as Mr Anderson did teaching about the fight for civil rights in 1960s America, we do not increase understanding by telling people that they should be ashamed of their past or their country. Rather, we do so by exploring and explaining what has gone before and putting it in context, thereby working to make our future better than our past. That could and should be the great achievement of Black History Month.

4.44 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie). He gave an excellent speech, particularly about the role of Scotland and Scotland's history in the empire. Certainly, as a Welsh Member of Parliament, I agree that it was not a uniquely English enterprise at all.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this incredibly important debate and on reminding us of the fact that it is absolutely crucial that this House recognises Black History Month and the contribution that black people have made, and continue to make, to our country, both nationally and locally.

I also pay tribute to a gentleman called Leonard Lawrence, who was one of the Windrush generation who left Jamaica and settled in Port Talbot, the largest town in my Aberavon constituency. Lenny the Lion, as he was known, helped to build Port Talbot town centre and Tawe Bridge and even prevented Swansea from flooding after seawater began coming through a hole in one of the lock gates at the dock. He worked on building the steelworks in Newport and on numerous construction projects around Port Talbot. He also worked in the Port Talbot steelworks.

Britain has a strong tradition of welcoming people from all around the world who decide to make their homes here, but like so many of the Windrush generation, Lenny experienced hostility, racism and inequality. I pay tribute to the fact that he was one of the founding members of the Swansea Bay association that allowed members of the Windrush generation to make their voices heard and to tell their stories.

It hurts me to say it, but while Britain, Wales and Aberavon have become more tolerant and welcoming places, a level of hostility and inequality has clearly continued into the 21st century. I refer particularly to the shameful hostile environment culture at the heart of the UK Conservative Government. This caused many of the Windrush generation to have their right to remain questioned, to be prevented from working or accessing NHS care, and even to be threatened with

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deportation. What a disgrace. The Home Secretary apologised, rightly so, and has committed to implementing all 30 recommendations from the lessons learned review, but just last week, Wendy Williams, who chaired the review, criticised the Home Office for failing to make adequate progress in changing the culture at that Government Department. This is no way to treat people who were integral to rebuilding our country after the second world war. They deserve better from our Government.

Events this year have shone a light on structural racism and inequality. The shocking and appalling killing of George Floyd was one such incident, but it is also extremely concerning that covid-19 has disproportionately impacted on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. No community is immune from racism or inequality, and in the aftermath of George Floyd's death I received correspondence from constituents who told me of their experiences of racism and hostility.

Aberavon is a warm and welcoming place, so to hear about these stories was deeply saddening. Behaviour such as that should not go unchallenged, so it was heartening that, in a show of solidarity, around 500 of my constituents gathered for a peaceful sit-down demonstration on the seafront in Aberavon as part of the Black Lives Matter campaign. That really helped our community to raise awareness of the issues, to increase education about the damage that racism causes, and to stand firmly against injustice and inequality.

One of the most valuable tools that we have in tackling racial injustice is education. Learning more about the contribution black people have made to our society is absolutely crucial, but confining black history to one month alone is not enough. So I welcome that Wales's First Minister and Race Council Cymru have launched Black History Cymru 365 to ensure that black history is celebrated all year round. The Welsh Government have also established a new working group to advise on how to improve the teaching of themes relating to ethnic minority communities across all parts of the curriculum.

I want to close with two quotes that mean a lot to me. One is from the Durham miners:

"The past we inherit, the future we build".

That goes to the heart of what we are discussing today. We cannot change our past but we must learn from it and build a better future for our future generations.

The second quote is from Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of this country, who said,

"it's the people not like us that make us grow."

That is so important. We learn so much more about ourselves by learning about the experience of others. It is those deeper insights, that more nuanced understanding and that honest and robust debate about our past and about the lived experience of others that will build a better society, better communities and a stronger and more cohesive United Kingdom.

4.50 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), whose constituency is very close to my heart. My father-in-law, Huw Thomas, was at the

steel mills at Port Talbot. It is a place I care passionately about. I thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning the steel mills.

We are here to talk about history. I would like to declare an interest: I studied history at university. I am passionate about history—all history, but especially the history of this country and this great nation. School teacher Robin Nonhebel is one of the reasons I am here in this place and studied history at university. I just wish everyone had been taught by him. He opened up history to generations. I wish he had taught more pupils at the school—he was well-known and well-loved. For instance, he taught me that the first King of all England was King Athelstan in 927 AD. It is important that we all know our history.

That love of history is incredibly important. Only by knowing our past—our complete past—can we know the future. There is no problem that we face or are going to face that has not already been faced in the past and been answered. Whether that is racism, as has been talked about already, or other issues, all those issues have been addressed in the past. Only by knowing our past can we know our future.

Black History Month is a very important issue, but I say black history is British history. We have one shared history, black and white. Black people have been present throughout the history of this great nation—at our highs and at our lows, when we have done well and when we have done badly. It is a shared collective history and that needs to continue to be taught. I do not believe that we should separate black history from white history. We should have one history, because we have one history.

When I think about that point, I think of some great British moments. I encourage everyone next time they are walking up to Trafalgar Square to look at Nelson's Column—not just to look at Nelson, but at the relief along the bottom of the column. One of the key pictures on the relief shows a black African who was there at the battle of Trafalgar. According to the records, there were 18 people born in Africa fighting with the British Navy on that day in 1805 when we defeated the perfidious French and Spanish and saved our country from invasion. There were black people standing shoulder to shoulder with British people, fighting at one of the most pivotal moments in our history, when we could have been invaded.

There are more records in the other place. The picture "The Death of Nelson" shows when Nelson has been shot by a sniper and there is a sailor pointing out the sniper. That sailor is black and is pointing out the person who shot one of our great national heroes, Nelson. That is just one example of where black people, British people and white people—we are one British people—are working together.

It goes on. In 1857, a black British sailor, Able Seaman William Hall, won the Victoria Cross. In 1855, in the Crimean War, Mary Seacole was a great nurse, standing with us in some of our darkest hours. The list goes on. Ignatius Sancho was the first black person to vote in a general election—not a general election in this century, or even in the last century. The first general election he voted in was in 1774, before the vast majority of people in this country got a vote. Black people were having a positive impact on our democracy even back then. I also read that he was an ardent monarchist and that he was against the Americans and their call to revolution, so we like him even more for that.

We must mention the darker days. I look back to Henry VIII—as we all know, the dissolution of the monasteries was one of the greatest travesties of our history. However, apparently, his musician, a trumpeter, was John Blanke, who again was black. Throughout our British history, we have so many integral black people taking part and involved. Our schools should be teaching about this history, but they should not be teaching about black history in isolation. They should teach about British history and make sure that black people's roles are justifiably encountered in it, for good and for bad.

However, this is not just about British history. If we go back further, black people have shaped world history. We have talked about the pharaohs, and the Kush dynasty was mentioned. The 25th pharaonic dynasty was a black dynasty from Nubia. They decided that the Egyptians had become so decadent in their ways that they overthrew the Egyptian pharaohs and replaced them with black pharaohs. When was the last time, when we learnt about the Egyptians, that we talked about the black pharaohs? We should talk about that more in our history. Even if we look at Christianity and the Christian faith, which is imbued throughout our history across Europe, the story—the great message—is that, when the three kings came to Jesus, one of them, by tradition called Balthazar, was from Africa. Even throughout our thousands of years of Christian history, black people have had an integral part in it.

For me, black history is British history. We need to learn all about it because we are one people. We are one British people. We should celebrate what everyone has achieved, black or white, rich or poor. We should not necessarily divide the two, but we should make sure that when we teach our British history, we talk about the integral part that black people have played in our great British history.

4.56 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this debate. It is vital that we celebrate black history and the struggle for racial justice in the UK. This has been such an important debate at such an important time, and it is certainly of much importance for my constituents and my constituency, because Sheffield was one of the engine rooms of the industrial revolution. Sheffield, Hallam was where many of the business magnates of the age made their homes. They invested in the machinery and the mills that would earn Sheffield its reputation as a steel city, but those factories were not used only to produce steel or Sheffield cutlery, which we celebrate often. They were also used, unfortunately—as in many cities—for a more sinister objective: they made the tools that were used on the plantations by people sold into slavery on the other side of the Atlantic. We can see the design of those tools in Joseph Smith's book published in 1816, called "Explanation Or Key, to the Various Manufactories of Sheffield".

We also have our fair share of people who have sought to dismantle that legacy. In 1790, Sheffield hosted the author and anti-slavery activist, Olaudah Equiano. It also has an international connection to the great American abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, through the letters of Mary Anne Rawson, who led the Sheffield Female Anti-Slavery Society, the first society in Britain

to argue for an immediate end to slavery. Ever since Equiano, Sheffield has had a tradition of campaigning for racial justice. It has played host to Malcolm X, declared itself a city of sanctuary and united in the face of far-right hatred of the Muslim community.

I know about the city's role in making plantation tools because of the Sheffield Black Atlantic Project at the University of Sheffield. We need more work such as that at our universities and in our schools and colleges, so we do not have ignorance about our cities' roles in globalisation and our legacy. We also need to do much more to dismantle institutional racism in our education system. According to recent figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, only 1% of our professors are black. It is not just history written in the past that is over-represented by white academics; it is happening now and we need to challenge that.

Black History Month should be about more than looking to the past; it is about struggling for a better future, too. Today, campaigners in my constituency fight for justice for Simba Mujakachi. Simba's family moved to Sheffield when he was 14. His father applied for asylum due to persecution in Zimbabwe, but was refused. As a refused asylum seeker, he was denied work and denied access to the NHS. Last year, Simba suffered a stroke, and he now owes £93,000 to the health service, which was established to provide care free at the point of use to all those who need it. I am proud to stand with him as he campaigns for justice for himself and for all those denied medical treatment as a result of the Government's "hostile environment" policy.

It is the same policy that led to the Windrush scandal and the deportation of black British people, a generation that contributed so much to Sheffield's history, including our steel industry. Like Simba, those people had spent their entire adult lives in the UK and lacked only the paperwork to prove their nationality. The fact that we live in a society that demands papers from black British people to prove their citizenship or to access public services should shame us all. Black History Month is an opportunity to celebrate the contribution of black communities to our culture, society and politics, but we must also remember that history is a living thing. Just as we recall the injustices of the past and those who have fought against them, we should also stand with those, like Simba, who continue to struggle today.

5 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): According to the philosopher Michael Oakeshott, civilisation

"begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries...is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves."

Conversation, of course, implies a discourse in which no one voice dominates, no one is shouted down and contrasting perspectives are heard and respected, even when agreement is unlikely and compromise unexplored. Yet, we now live in an age where many have no interest in a real conversation and where delight is taken in silencing dissenting voices. We live in an age where some talk of the importance of history, but really mean propaganda—when someone is suggesting, in essence, that people educate themselves, know the doctrine, learn the mantra and toe the line. In our brave new world,

[Sir John Hayes]

activist groups vie for attention by shouting ever louder in what can best be described as a competition of victimhood.

Anne McLaughlin: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will not at the moment, but I will a little later.

Each group claims a spurious moral authority founded on its own sense of oppressed marginalisation. The historical truth is dismissed, in cultural Marxist terms, as a construct of persecutors: only they really understand the past and the present, and they now assert that others must be forced to be cleansed by acknowledging their guilt and by recognising their unconscious bias. The notion that we are defined by our race or sexuality is now so ubiquitous that we have become numb to just how disturbingly stultifying it really is. To confine and condense the identity of a unique individual made in the image of God to things over which they have no choice—their gender or their race—is sorrowfully lacking in perspective and ambition.

Some of my colleagues may be reluctant to engage in this debate, but that is not true of the Minister for Equalities, any more than it is true of the Home Secretary or the Attorney General. They are in the vanguard of the battle against this kind of dogmatic, doctrinal cultural Marxism, because they know that politics is palpably about values, not just about dull, mechanistic, economic minutiae. We should celebrate the contribution of everyone to our country, whatever their background, their colour or creed, and of course, in that spirit I welcome Black History Month, but history is very rarely a simple case of black and white, literally or metaphorically. A proper appreciation of history is dependent on understanding that the past is as complex as the present, and that humanity is both flawed and capable of greatness. Let us take the British empire, for example. Though of course it is true that empires begin in the interests of their colonial founders, the crass assumption that all that is subsequently done in their imperial names is exclusively wicked is as stupid as it is simplistic. In the words of the former chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Trevor Phillips:

“The woke ultras who want to wipe away all symbols of British imperialism don’t speak for families who lived under the Empire”.

Anne McLaughlin: I will not go back to what the right hon. Gentleman said earlier because I have forgotten his exact words, but does he not accept that there are different perspectives when it comes to the empire and our role in it? Should those different perspectives be discussed in education and should we be told about them, or should we just have the one perspective that we have now?

Sir John Hayes: Yes, of course I accept that. I am a trained history teacher, so of course I understand that there are differing interpretations of history. The problem I was describing earlier—the hon. Lady clearly bristled when I was doing so—is that there are those who want to sanitise and reinvent history. The truth is that all we are now is a product of all that came before, good, bad and ugly, and we cannot simply wipe away the past. This is not year zero, and to believe otherwise is, frankly, Orwellian.

James Sunderland *rose*—

Sir John Hayes: No, I will not give way because I know that many more contributors want to get in.

In years gone by, children were taught about figures who unite us, regardless of background or circumstances, in a shared love of the country: from Alfred the Great to Florence Nightingale and from Nelson to Winston Churchill and Edith Cavell.

James Sunderland *rose*—

Sir John Hayes: I will give way briefly, because I gave way to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin).

James Sunderland: What does my right hon. Friend think about recent attempts to discredit these national heroes?

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend has, among other colleagues, played a noble role in challenging some of the institutions that have bought exactly the cultural Marxist agenda that I describe. I am thinking in particular of the work that he, I and others have done in ensuring that the good names of Sir Winston Churchill and Horatio Nelson are not besmirched. In doing that, we are of course not arguing that all that came before us was good and pure, but to take the view that those individuals should be judged by the standards of today and not seen in the context of their time is ahistorical rather than an interpretation of history, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East was advocating.

The stories of these figures are not based on the advancement of the interests of a few—of a small subsection of society—but are stories of dedication and duty, service and sacrifice for the common good, for the many. So compelling is their heroism that many migrants to Britain, notably from Africa and the West Indies, chose to name their children Nelson, Winston and Gordon after men who are among the empire’s greatest sons. Yet now culture warriors are determined, by reinventing the past, to dictate the future. Under their heel, history must be rewritten and the very concept of heroism obliterated. It is time for patriots in this country—black and white, regardless of their origins—to fight back and to reclaim heroism, patriotism and history from those who seek to distort and demean all that has gone by in the pursuit of political ideology.

The overwhelming majority of the British public, and in particular the working classes—the class that I come from, in stark contrast to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who spoke earlier—take a view different from that of the bourgeois metropolitan elite. Most people in this country are deeply proud of their country and its history. Earlier this summer, polling for Policy Exchange’s history project found that 69% of people rightly believed that UK history as a whole was something to be proud of; just 17% thought it was something of which to be ashamed.

While it is right to celebrate the historic contribution of black, white and Asian Britons, let us first and foremost celebrate what we share. Let us celebrate all of our yesterdays, for unless we do, all our tomorrows will be poorer and poisoned. As I said earlier, I want others to contribute, so I shall conclude. As one of the few

qualified history teachers in this place, let me offer this lesson: ours is a land of hope and glory—a proud Union with a past to be proud of.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I just want to point out that I am trying to get everybody in and if people who have spoken intervene again, that prevents others from getting in.

5.8 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this very important debate. I am really pleased to be participating.

October is the time of the year when we recognise the achievements, resilience, history and culture of our black communities, but it is also important that the disadvantage and discrimination experienced is also remembered. No one is born racist, yet here we are in 2020 still debating how we eradicate the rise of racism at home and around the world.

This year, Black History Month is even more important. The global health pandemic, the very public death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement have shone a bright light on the structural racism and inequalities experienced by black people. Racism is a systemic problem that requires systemic solutions. No more reports or recommendations: we need actions, because actions do speak louder than words.

As a black person growing up in Liverpool, I know all about systemic, deeply entrenched racism. We have the longest-established black community in Europe, dating back hundreds of years. We are a city whose wealth was built on the back of the slave trade. I am the first black MP to have been elected in Liverpool—a very sad indictment of the city—but I am also very proud and privileged to represent the constituency of Liverpool, Riverside. In 2008, Liverpool was awarded European capital of culture status, and the strapline was “The World in One City”. While we have long-established diverse communities, these communities remain invisible in the city—under-represented in the retail sector and in our public sector organisations, and with very limited political representation: we have only six black Labour councillors out of 90.

It is really important that we recognise that African history was interrupted by African slavery, when millions of Africans were forcibly removed and sold into slavery. As black people, we still live with the legacy of slavery. Our education system perpetuates the myth of black underachievement, witnessed in the high numbers of black boys excluded from school. Sadly, in Liverpool we have a significant under-representation of teachers in our schools, and only one black headteacher. But in response to the many issues highlighted by the global Black Lives Matter campaign, Liverpool City Council has set up a race task group. The Liverpool Learning Partnership will work with Liverpool schools over the next academic year to develop a curriculum that is far more representative and promote the role of black people across all subject areas and through time.

Learning black history is a vital part of ensuring that young people have a balanced understanding of Britain's past and how it shapes our society today. It is crucial to ensure that young people have the tools to challenge present-day racism and discrimination, and to understand

the key pivotal moments in British history. Winston Churchill is a controversial figure. He is regarded as the greatest Briton ever, but what do we understand of his role in the Bengal famine? The Bristol bus boycott of 1963 is seen as influential in the passing of the Race Relations Act 1965. Mary Seacole is now recognised as the first nurse practitioner. Walter Tull was a professional footballer who debuted for Spurs in 1909. That is to name but a few.

I was very shocked when I arrived here last December and witnessed the stark divisions that replicate our society, with low-paid black people working as cleaners and security and catering staff, the under-representation of young black people working for MPs as staffers and parliamentary assistants, and the lack of black MPs as Chairs of Select Committees. We clearly have a long way to go to be equal in this place.

Black history is all of our history, and it should be taught in the school curriculum all year round. We should not have to wait until October to celebrate the many contributions that black people have made to this country. I just remind people: we only have one race, the human race.

5.13 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for securing a debate on this important matter. I was delighted to be a co-sponsor.

As many of us have said, Black History Month is a great opportunity to celebrate the contribution to our society made by black British people over many centuries. While records show people of African heritage living in these islands for nearly two millennia, very few have ever had their stories told. Many of us in this country today are unaware of the long and complex history of black people in Britain. That is why I tabled an Adjournment debate a few weeks ago to ask the Government to ensure that black history plays a prominent part in the history curriculum in our schools. I would like that to include the history of other ethnic minorities in this country too. I want every child, whatever their heritage or ethnicity, to be able to say, “British history is our history. Black history is British history.” I want them to know that people from BAME communities have played a hugely important role in our islands' story, as has been pointed out articulately and passionately in many of the speeches that we have heard.

History in schools should always be taught in a balanced, objective and impartial way, but an understanding of history can help to inculcate a sense of unity. History teaching should be inclusive, not divisive. We should be honest about, for example, the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade and this country's 250-year involvement in that appalling crime against humanity, but we should also recognise that our nation has a strong history of standing up for individual freedom, for the rule of law and for justice.

There is validity in the narrative that we are the nation that pioneered parliamentary democracy and championed values now respected across the world at a time when other countries were still labouring under tyranny. We need to learn from our past and recognise its conflicts, complexities and contradictions. Some aspects are noble and heroic, not least when this nation stood

[Theresa Villiers]

alone against the might of the Nazi war machine, but there are other aspects that are darker and crueller, including that long involvement in the horrors of the triangular trade.

The reality is that there was not an inevitable or unstoppable sweep of history towards modern values, equality and respect starting with Magna Carta. The real picture is much more complicated. Progress was slow, with many setbacks, and almost every step forward was hard won and strongly opposed by many at the time. If we study black history, there is no escaping the fact that for many centuries black British people were subject to racism, cruelty and injustice in this country, as were ethnic minorities in other parts of the world.

That legacy has an impact today, but we should take heart from the stories of black people in our history who succeeded in spite of the adversity that they faced. We have heard about many of them this afternoon, but I would like to mention just one—Mary Prince. Born a slave in Bermuda, her autobiographical narrative was published in London in 1831. It was hugely influential and successful, a landmark in the fight to end slavery in the British empire. It formed part of the first ever anti-slavery petition by a black woman to Parliament, illustrating Mary Prince's determination: while she might have spent much of her life enslaved, her spirit was never broken, and she never stopped resisting the oppression to which she had been subjected. Her struggle has helped to create the better world in which we live today.

5.18 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) who, like me, represents a constituency in outer London. I would also like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for introducing this debate on Black History Month, and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate to take place.

We have heard excellent contributions from many hon. Members. Many of my constituents feel deeply about black history. I have received over 50 emails asking me to support the campaign to make black and colonial history compulsory in school. Almost 1,000 of my constituents signed the e-petition, which has now secured over 250,000 signatures. One student who wrote to me said that they had never studied any of these topics in any detail other than their being simply mentioned "in passing". Topics as important as colonialism and slavery, along with the contribution of black people to our country, have shaped our society so much that they should be taught in our schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) showed in his contribution that, by not making those topics a compulsory part of the GCSE curriculum, few students are learning those vital parts of our history.

That lack of education trickles up. Both the Macpherson report into the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the Wendy Williams review into the Windrush scandal mentioned that the lack of understanding about cultural diversity and colonial history in the curriculum had influenced the policies and practices that enabled the shameful episodes of Stephen Lawrence's murder and

the Windrush scandal to take place. Those reports were published 20 years apart. Surely that should be a call for action now.

Some schools have been working hard to teach colonial history, which is really important, particularly in a constituency such as mine, one of the most diverse in the country. Last year, we celebrated with the "Our Hounslow" films about four different Hounslow people. Torron was born and brought up locally in Brentford and went to school with my sons. He set up the Alliance Dance Unit, which is keeping young people active, off the streets and out of trouble by being involved in creative dance. Goitom is a retired man who came here from Eritrea. He spent most of his working life as a foster carer and a Home Office interpreter and is now a respected community leader.

Ciya was doing her A-levels. She was a member of the Youth Parliament and spoke in this Chamber. She came here as a very young child and spoke of her hope for the future. Very differently, Richard and Christine, who I would describe as the archetypal English home counties couple, sold their comfortable house in the country and moved to Hounslow, not just to be near their family and growing grandchildren, but to contribute actively to Hounslow town and its diverse community.

In terms of our schools, Sam Jones works at Bolder Academy in Isleworth in my constituency. He told me that with his year 8 students, he focuses almost exclusively on colonial history and what the empire means to different people in different places, and all in the context of the story of migration to Britain from the Roman period to the present day. He is also the chair of Be Bold History, which is a free national network for history teachers that pools resources and improves teaching. He said, "By teaching more diverse histories, we not only better reflect the communities that we teach, we can also reflect core British values: tolerance, shared community and the rule of law."

Making black and colonial history compulsory in our schools, particularly the GCSE curriculum, is a first step, but clearly a vital one, and it resonates with students in my constituency whose parents, grandparents or great-grandparents came from all over the world—as well as down the road. Their history is our borough's history. Their history is Britain's history. We should make black history an integral part of the school curriculum to enable all young people to be proud of their heritage here and confident that they have a future in our country and in their community.

5.23 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Next Tuesday is an important anniversary in black history. It is the 41st birthday of the independent nation of St Vincent and the Grenadines. I am proud that Wycombe is home to the largest population from the islands outside the islands.

One of the most tricky experiences of my 10 years as a politician was in a preceding Black History Month. I remember being with some Caribbean ladies from St Vincent and the Grenadines 2nd Generation, the organisation that celebrates their history. I was asking about why black history is so important and I was told a difficult story. It was one of those moments when the atmosphere cooled and suddenly felt very still—I can see it vividly in my mind's eye, although I may forget the exact words that were spoken.

A Caribbean lady with a British name said to me, “Every time I write my name, every time I see my name, every time I hear my name, I am reminded that I am descended from slaves.” How can anyone gainsay such a thing? What a thing to say and believe; what an experience to have. I cannot possibly know what that is like. I dare say that other people do not feel the same, but that lady’s story stays with me still. I am very proud that my community has a really vibrant presence from St Vincent and the Grenadines.

One of the people who the community will be celebrating this Black History Month is George Alexander Gratton. I will let the National Portrait Gallery tell his story:

“Born on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, the son of African slaves. Like other slaves, he was likely to have been named after the sugar plantation’s owner or overseer, a common practice at the time that identified slaves as the property of their owners. He suffered with a condition characterised by pigment loss in the skin, resulting in white patches, now known as Vitiligo. His owner, perhaps aware that culturally held superstitions could put the child at risk, saw an opportunity to profit”—

of all things—

“from his condition. He was sold for 1000 guineas, shipped to Britain and consigned to the care of John Richardson who exhibited him in a circus for the paying public”.

I will not read how he was marketed. The description continues:

“Contradictory to this callous exploitation, childless Richardson had the boy baptised and treated him like a son. When Gratton died at a young age, Richardson held onto his body whilst a customised brick vault was constructed to bury him at All Saints Cemetery, Marlow. He requested on his deathbed in 1837 that he be buried in the same vault as Gratton.”

That story illustrates some of the extraordinary complexity of black history in the United Kingdom, both shameful and quite moving.

But let us not pretend that all black history lies in the past. After I made some remarks recently on the BBC’s “Politics Live”, I found myself in conversation with a black woman a little younger than me who had grown up and gone to school in my constituency. She told me a story from when she was growing up—they did not spot this at the time—of a teacher putting her and the Asian children in the class in a separate room and not teaching them: flat-out, frank racism, visited upon a British woman a little younger than me in a school in my constituency some years ago. That is a shocking and shameful thing.

When, then, we turn to the recent BLM protests, I have been listening very carefully to my constituents. Notwithstanding the reasonable remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) about the ideology that drives some, I think that it is incumbent on all of us really to listen and get alongside our constituents and friends—our fellow citizens—and to try to understand their life and where they are coming from. I can stand here today and say that I believe that we are all morally equal, that we are all equal before the law, that we are all politically equal, and that we must all have equal opportunity. I can say that and I can believe it, but I am sure that there are some people in my constituency who do not believe it and who roll their eyes when they hear it, because it is not their lived experience.

I am very proud to have been asked by Albie Amankona and Siobhan Aarons to be the chair of the advisory board for Conservatives Against Racism for Equality.

I am going to work with them to develop a conservative and a liberal language of equality and inclusion, and of justice—a language that supports life in a free society, and does not adopt the ideas of intersectionalism and critical race theory that set us against one another. I want to work with them and with everybody in this House to make real this idea of equality.

Since he said it at a celebration in my constituency—a celebration of our wonderful Vincentian community—I am going to quote His Excellency Cenio Lewis, and I shall send him a record of it in *Hansard* afterwards. He said something with great humility, passion and force, which encapsulates enormous wisdom and which I hope will stay with us all: “Let’s remember we are no better than anyone else, but no one is any better than us.”

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I will now have to reduce the time limit to five minutes. I have been able to warn the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt).

5.29 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I join many other Members in thanking the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for securing this vital debate. It gives us an opportunity to talk about the hugely positive contribution that the black community in this country has made and continues to make, but also about some of the existing challenges in tackling racism in our society.

I would like to touch quickly on some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), who has now left her seat. It is deeply unfortunate that that attack on the great Winston Churchill has been made in this debate. My message to sections of the left who are determined to denigrate his legacy is that they will never be successful. That is because the vast majority of people in this country—black, white, whatever—see Winston Churchill as one of the greatest people that have ever, ever lived in this country, and that will never be up for debate as far as I am concerned.

I would also like to touch on the speech a lot earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), who spoke about sport and the huge contribution made by black people to sport. As a Newcastle United fan, I remember that when I was growing up Andy Cole was my icon. I had a massive picture of him behind my bed, and I was devastated and went to school crying when Manchester United purchased him. But then we got our next superstar, Les Ferdinand—also a black football player—from Queen’s Park Rangers. That is how I grew up. As the Member of Parliament for Ipswich Town, I must also mention Titus Bramble and Kieron Dyer, two fantastic players who have played for both Newcastle and Ipswich, who are also black.

In Ipswich we have a significant black community. Only a few weeks ago, I engaged with the Caribbean and African health support forum, which does fantastic work in the town, supporting the black community with specific health issues that impact it more than other communities. I am incredibly proud to represent it and work with it closely, and I will continue to do so.

Let me talk briefly about the curriculum. I think that in our history curriculum we should teach a shared history—a history that teaches people that we have got things wrong in the past and we should look at the

[Tom Hunt]

different ways in which that is the case, but of course never loses sight of the fact that we remain the greatest country on the planet today. I think that there is further we could go in teaching the history of black people in this country and the contributions they have made, but I am very keen that that is done as part of a shared history. I would not support anything that promoted separateness and alternative historical narratives. Ultimately, we have to have white boys and girls, black boys and girls, and other BAME groups all in the same classroom, learning a shared history together. That does include looking at the injustices that have happened in the past, but it also includes the message that there is so much more that binds us together than separates us.

Touching on current issues in the media, like other hon. Members I was appalled by the death of George Floyd. I was absolutely appalled. I think that the vast majority of people who have gone on protests are well meaning, and I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) that we should listen to the strength of their feeling. However, I think it is unfortunate that some of the leadership figures in BLM have, at times, strayed beyond what should be a powerful yet simple and unifying message in opposition to the racism that still exists in our society, into cultural Marxism, the abolition of the nuclear family, defunding the police and overthrowing capitalism. In some senses, I find it quite regretful that a message and an agenda that should have been unifying have, at times, been allowed to become very divisive, but ultimately it is our duty to make sure that the right message is learned from that horrific incident. It needs to be one of unity, moderation and looking to improve upon the situation we have today, where we know that racism still exists.

Looking at the petitions, I would also like us to be a little careful about the term “institutional racism”. Yes, we need to be alive to the fact that there will be individuals who harbour racist views in key institutions such as schools and the police, and they need to be rooted out, but to smear an entire organisation as being institutionally racist is, again, incredibly unhelpful and divisive.

I remember hearing the current Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), speak about this topic three or four years ago. At the time, I thought she would be a future Mayor of London, and right now I wish she was. However, we will have an opportunity, perhaps next May, to get the first black Mayor of London, and I hope that the people of London take it.

5.34 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): In opening the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Opong-Asare), whom I congratulate, called for a review of the national curriculum so that we have a better understanding of the history being taught and the struggles and contributions of black people in it. She is absolutely right, and I am glad that proposition has had widespread support in this debate.

I was pleased to see that in the comprehensive improvement plan for the Home Office, which was published last month in the wake of the response to the Windrush scandal, recommendation 6 is to implement a

learning plan on UK history in the Home Office. It is definitely needed in the Home Office, but it is also needed in schools and in wider society. I want to make the case for including in the review important recent contributions in the borough I represent.

I was in the borough in the early 1980s, when the first generation of Asian young people was making its way through the education system. In September 1983, after a series of incidents in and around Little Ilford School—just a few months before I became a governor of that school—racist thugs started to attack young Asian pupils, and the young people started to organise to defend themselves. Eight Asian youngsters, who were essentially the victims of racism, were arrested and charged with conspiracy. They were the Newham Eight. They secured massive community support, not least from other young people, and they were eventually cleared, or given minimal community sentences, because the courts recognised that they were acting in self-defence.

That campaign and many others secured change. Racism was defeated and the culture was changed. I pay tribute to those who, despite being young, took a stand and won. My friend and colleague Unmesh Desai, who is now a member for City and East in the London Assembly, where he serves with the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon)—indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead was also one of his colleagues—and chairs the Police and Crime Committee, played a key role in the Newham campaign. I pay tribute to him and the Newham Monitoring Project, which started at that time and has planned a teachers’ resource pack on the Newham Eight story for next spring. We need our curriculum to cover important parts of our history such as that. One of the lessons is that the battles, having been won, often have to be fought all over again when the problems recur.

My hon. Friend also called for a race equality audit of Government policy, and I want to focus on one policy in particular: no recourse to public funds. Under that policy, many hard-working, law-abiding black families, during the 10-year period in which they have to pay thousands of pounds in fees to renew their leave to remain every two and a half years, are barred from applying for social security when they lose their employment, as many have done in this pandemic. There are 1.4 million people across the UK who cannot access the benefit system for that reason, including families with 175,000 children. Some 100,000 families have had that condition imposed on them in the past year.

The Unity Project, which does superb work on that issue, recently reported that, out of a group of 140 families with that condition imposed on them that it is working with, 77% are black African and 12% are black Caribbean. Certainly, the overwhelming proportion of those affected are from ethnic minorities. There is a disproportionate impact on black British children. Eighty-five per cent. of the families in the Unity Project research contained at least one child who is a British citizen.

That policy would not survive the race equality audit proposed by my hon. Friend. As the Unity Project puts it:

“NRPF is inherently more likely to affect BME British children than white British children indicating the indirect racially discriminatory impacts of the condition.”

Is that the intention of the policy? No, it is not, but it is the impact of it, and we need to address it.

5.39 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I am proud to represent the constituency of Kensington, which has Notting Hill and North Kensington at its beating heart. I am delighted that, when the Windrush generation came to the UK, many settled in Notting Hill and the Ladbroke Grove area. We saw the birth of one of the most iconic cultural celebrations of black British life: the Notting Hill carnival. Although it was clearly not possible for it to take place physically this year, I am glad to say that it went ahead virtually.

There is so much to celebrate about the black community in Kensington, and I am delighted that my council recognised that this month in awarding Black History Month grants to many local groups and institutions to celebrate the involvement of black British people in our cultural life. One of those was the Harrow Club—an inspirational charity and youth club that I had the pleasure of taking the Home Secretary to see at the beginning of the year.

There is so much talent in the black community, as has been referred to, in the arts, in media, in film and in sport, and we must harness that talent. We must understand that it is present not only in the creative arts, but also in business, which is my background. There are so many talented black people in the corporate world, and so many young, talented black entrepreneurs in my constituency want to go out there, set up businesses, create wealth and create opportunities for the wider community.

We must also recognise the challenges in the black community, a number of which have been referred to. Clearly, the treatment of many in the Windrush generation by successive Governments, Labour and Conservative, was unacceptable. Those injustices cannot be unwound, but I am glad to say that the Home Secretary has accepted the recommendations of the Wendy Williams review. The recent coronavirus crisis has shown up health inequalities, and I am glad that my hon. Friend the Minister is leading on six new research projects to look at the correspondence between covid and ethnicity.

Average hourly earnings are still less among black people in the 30-plus age group, but, interestingly, they have almost evened up between black people and white people in the 16 to 30-year-old age group. Interestingly, the Chinese community and the Indian community surpass the white community in both those age groups. That is why this Government's agenda of levelling up is so important—not only levelling up as between the north and the south, but levelling up in our inner cities. I believe passionately in equality of opportunity in education, in the workplace and in healthcare. Let us celebrate the huge contribution that the black community have made to Kensington and to the UK, and let us look forward to even more.

5.43 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I echo other Members' congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this important debate, which I am sure will be influential in the life of our country.

In the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd, more than 500 people in Putney, Roehampton and Southfields contacted me wanting to know what action would be taken.

What had happened had struck a chord with their own lives and experience, and it represented the kind of society that we do not want to be. Many of them talked about our education system being at the root of the problems in our society, and a key part of their demand was the call for every schoolchild to be taught honestly and truthfully about Britain's colonial history. I pay tribute to all those young people who wrote to me and to all the teachers who want to do more in their schools. It is essential that Britain wrestles with, and reckons with, our colonial past, as it is part of our history. As has been said many times, we also need to do all that we can to ensure that we value and celebrate the achievements of black Britons and black people across the world. That is what is so important about Black History Month. It is not just about history, but about our current world and about life at the moment. It is a time to celebrate activism, as it is that activism that has brought us to where we are today, and to understand how far we still have to go.

This subject cannot be a voluntary add-on. In previous debates, Ministers have listed the opportunities to bring black history into the curriculum—at both primary and secondary level. None the less, it is not good enough that it is optional for some teachers in some schools. I welcome the call by my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead for a review of the national curriculum. I add to that the demand of the Black Curriculum campaign that there is a compulsory module for black history in key stage 3.

Developing curriculums takes careful planning and research. If the Government really are ready to take up the call and believe that we can teach the colonial legacy accurately and that every child can learn about black people's contributions, they need to back it up with resourcing for schools. I pay tribute to UNICEF for its Rights Respecting campaign. Rights Respecting schools—there are three levels of bronze, silver and gold—have the opportunity to look at black history across the curriculum within the context of rights. Many schools in my constituency have used this scheme to great benefit.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Lady, because what she is showing is that innovations at a local level in teaching history, such as history festivals, can bring about huge differences. We have our own Gloucester History Festival. In fact, today is the last day that anyone in this House and outside can listen to Janina Ramirez's conversation with David Olusoga on the gloucesterhistoryfestival.co.uk site free of charge. It is a wonderful discussion with one of our leading black history historians. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is the sort of thing that can make a huge difference to young people's perceptions?

Fleur Anderson: I do agree and what an excellent advertisement for an event. I would add to that the work of Putney High School and of Chestnut Grove Academy. They have taken up the challenge to look at black history and to continue with innovation.

I join the call for the module to be compulsory and taught to every student. That would be a strong first step, and mean that all children will learn about black history—not just those who can go along to a festival or whose teachers have the time and resources to teach it. A compulsory module will require, as I have said,

[Fleur Anderson]

training for teachers and the development of resources. I join the call for the Department for Education to put in place a plan for the proper teaching of black history across our curriculum.

As a society, we must commit to an education system that fights racism, that ensures that every child can see their place in it and realise their full potential, that recognises the true and painful legacy of slavery and colonialism and puts it in the correct context, and that values the achievements of black people. Most of all, it will take us forward to a society that has no racism, that does not need to hold a debate such as this, that is truly equal and that ensures that we can all achieve our potential in society. Black history is British history and should be taught all year round.

5.49 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate on such important matters, as so many have said before me. I want to start with a really positive message that the UK has traditionally been one of the most open, tolerant, welcoming and diverse countries in the western world, with some of the lowest levels of hate crime in Europe. That is consistently found in a number of recent large-scale studies such as the Eurobarometer poll, the World Value Survey and the European Value Study. We can be clear that there is much more to be done, yes. We can agree that even one example of racial hatred and prejudice is wrong, yes. But we must none the less acknowledge that the vast majority of people in this country are open, tolerant and accepting on diversity issues; I know my constituents certainly are. Where there are threats to tolerance and peaceful co-existence, they come from both sides of society, the left and the right. It is clear that active xenophobia, racism and violence are totally unacceptable in this country, and we should rightly challenge them by responding swiftly with the full force of the law.

Black History Month is a great opportunity for celebration, but on education and the curriculum we should be clear and tackle some other areas, such as the cancel culture, which attempts to close down debate, discussion and learning in our universities and other educational institutions, and seeks to influence society by instilling sometimes political ideologies into what should be a neutral and fact-based educational curriculum. We must not politicise education. Where that happens, it is a feature of some of the most oppressive regimes in the world.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is making a good case about not allowing cancel culture to infuse our society. Does he agree that the renaming of the David Hume tower in the University of Edinburgh is a good example of what should not happen? We are talking about a great 18th century philosopher and great figure in the Scottish enlightenment, whose name was taken away from the tower because of one footnote in one essay 300 years ago. Does he agree that that is not helpful to the teaching of history or of black history?

Duncan Baker: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and we know that there are many instances of this happening: what happened at the Proms; episodes of “Fawlty Towers” being taken off air; and politicians not

being allowed to speak in university debates because their views perhaps differed from that of the university. I take my hon. Friend’s point entirely that there are many areas here, which is why I bring this issue to the Floor of the House.

As I was saying, some regimes fear free thinking and articulate citizens who may use their learning and fluency of thought to think for themselves in a free, democratic country, but we need have no such fears. We must never permit our educational system to become a vehicle for politics or politicising. Our schools and universities have always been and need to remain places of learning. They are places whose primary duty is to instil a love of learning, thinking and free expression, and to equip young people with the skills to think for themselves. That is why calls to decolonise our curriculum give me a little concern.

Our nation’s history is one of great breadth and depth, but we all know it is nuanced: there are examples of great triumphs and advances that have benefited civilisation in all kinds of ways; equally, there are examples of great failures and aspects of our past that through modern eyes and by today’s standards are shameful. All we need to do is teach—teach that history, warts and all, encourage as wide a range of perspectives as possible and facilitate the conversations that will empower young people to form their own conclusions about the issues that shape the world around them and to be meaningful contributors to the wider conversation. This is what we do every day. It is the cornerstone of our democracy. Our educational institutions should be reflections of the openness with which we debate, disagree, compromise and even find agreement here in Parliament. Robert Maynard Hutchins said:

“The objective of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives.”

However, it was Francis Bacon who put it best:

“Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.”

5.55 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this important debate and on the passion and eloquence of her opening speech. I echo her call to everyone who wants to make change happen to register to vote in next year’s elections. I am pleased to be speaking in the Black History Month debate today, particularly given the fact that many Luton South constituents have signed the parliamentary petitions on teaching black history as part of a more inclusive curriculum.

I have heard many others speak about their experiences at school, and I want to pay tribute to the fantastic education I got at a diverse, working-class comprehensive and the experiences that have enabled me to stand here in this debate as an ally with my black and brown friends from school. I also want to pay tribute to my former teacher, Mr Taylor, who did his bit for black history education over 30 years ago. But he was not a history teacher; he was our drama teacher. He recognised not only the importance of teaching black history but the fact that education comes in many forms. He recognised the power of drama and creativity to engage young people of all races with knowledge and ideas. This is not politicising

education, as the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) said; it is, importantly, enabling young people to better understand the world around them. That was how a diverse bunch of working-class kids from a comprehensive in Luton in the '80s learned about the life and actions of Martin Luther King and the wider civil rights movement in America. We did it through creating a play of his life in the form of a Greek tragedy, with the chorus reiterating: "Martin Luther King—he was black". When we performed it at the end-of-term show, my mum said that you could have heard a pin drop.

I take that with me now, as I speak in this debate, because I have now been given the opportunity to stand up once again for my friends. People have referenced a shared history, and we must all own that shared history, but the racism experienced by my friends at school, and sometimes by me alongside them for being their friend, makes the sharing of that history really painful. We cannot just say, "It's a shared history. Let's explore it." My experience of that history is very different from the experience of my black and brown friends.

I want to reflect on how we recognise and celebrate black history and the important black role models in my home town of Luton, and I shall do that by taking a moment to celebrate Luton's first black woman mayor, Councillor Desline Stewart. She was mayor in the mid-1990s, and she served our town as a local councillor for over 30 years. I was pleased to serve alongside her as a local councillor for a number of years. Desline was one of the key founders of the Mary Seacole Housing Association in my constituency. In the 1980s, Desline responded to direct pleas from young people who were running away from home. They sought her out, as she had built a reputation for her philanthropic work accommodating people from a wide range of backgrounds. She welcomed everyone into her kitchen if they needed help. Over time, more and more people went to her for help, until it became clear that she would need to increase her outreach. With the support of local politicians, grants from Urban Aid and support from Luton Council and Luton churches, a recommendation to the Housing Corporation resulted in the purchase of the first two houses on Brantwood Road to support her work.

Here is another example of how educating about black history comes in all forms. Desline chose to name the housing trust because she wanted to recognise Mary Seacole, a pioneering British Jamaican nurse and heroine of the Crimean war who overcame racism and injustice to nurse soldiers during that war 200-odd years ago. Desline felt a strong kinship with Mary Seacole and wanted to recognise her humanitarian work and altruism. She believed that there was an affinity between her own rescuing of homeless young people and Seacole's nursing of wounded soldiers on the battlefield. In celebrating black history, which is British history, we must remember that much of that history is recent and much of that history is local.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): After the next Member, I will have to reduce the time limit to four minutes, but on five minutes, I call Paul Bristow.

5.59 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing

this important debate. Black History Month is a fantastic opportunity to celebrate the contribution that black people and those with black heritage have made to our country's history. That is truly a positive thing. There are, naturally, aspects of our past that are negative. A history that involves an empire and Commonwealth is inevitably mixed. The history of specific issues is mixed, as this year has shown. Among them, we cannot forget the stain of slavery, but nor should we forget our country's role in ending slavery. It is worth recalling that, when America was engulfed in a civil war, with its southern states fighting to literally keep people in chains, our country had peacefully banned the trade for over half a century and the practice for three decades.

Our history is not perfect, but I believe it shows us to be an open and tolerant country. Black History Month is full of examples. I was particularly pleased this year to learn about Allan Glaisyer Minns, who became the Mayor of Thetford and the first black Mayor in the United Kingdom in 1904. As a member of the Select Committee on Health and Social Care, I am pleased to tell the House that he was a local doctor. As a Conservative Member, I am also pleased to say that he was a Conservative. I gather that Thetford is now planning a statue in his honour, and so it should, because black history is British history, and British history belongs to all of us.

Our identity as British is not a matter of race. Instead, when we search ourselves, we find that we are defined by our institutions and, above all, by the Crown, this Parliament and our common law. Our institutions are relevant to all of us, and the history of their hard-won evolution is therefore relevant to all of us. Relevance is not determined by the colour of one's skin, and nor is belonging. Our country continues to welcome people from across the world, not just to live here but to belong here. Our cultural richness is something to celebrate, and Black History Month is part of that. Unfortunately, some political activism has a counter-narrative that stresses our differences and tries to reduce us to them. It also denies a role to people as individuals, in order to subsume them into a group. That approach is profoundly dangerous. It used to be the racists who opposed or denied the possibility of social integration. It would be tragic if the good intentions of anti-racists resulted in forms of segregation.

My constituency is a standing rebuke to those ideas. Peterborough is highly diverse, but we stand together, and we are stronger together. The covid pandemic has seen us all come together—black, brown, white and all minorities. We fed and housed rough sleepers. We delivered supplies to those who were shielding. We supported charities and voluntary organisations. We did that as Peterbourians—as people from Peterborough—not as individually labelled groups. We are one city. We are proud of our city, proud of our country and proud to mark Black History Month.

I would like to pay tribute to Bernadetta Omondi—or Sherry, as she is often known—who chairs the Peterborough Racial Equality Council and the Black History Month committee. She and her team are a tremendous force for good in my city. While covid has prevented the annual celebration of Black History Month in Cathedral Square, they have delivered food parcels to the needy, supported people with mental health issues and raised money for charity at the Lush shop in Peterborough. I look forward

[Paul Bristow]

to joining her and her team at a black summit to address a number of issues with the city council and local police. She recognises, as I do, that we will not be able to reach our potential as a country and as a city unless people of colour also reach their potential. No one symbolises my “one city” message more than Sherry and her team, and they make me proud of Peterborough.

6.4 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Black History Month originated in the United States, where it is also known as African-American History Month, and it was created to remember important people and events in the history of the African diaspora. In the mid-1980s, Ansel Wong led an initiative here, which eventually resulted in Black History Month in the United Kingdom.

It is important not to miss the real point of this debate. I would like to argue what Black History Month should be and maybe what it should not be. This is not about appeasement to ethnic minorities, because it is an important part of British history and an important part of history for all of us in this country. It sits alongside other histories—social histories, military histories, post-war histories, and the histories of peoples as well, such as the modern experience of Sikhs, British Jewry and Muslims in this country. As for the Isle of Wight, our African and black history goes back to the Roman empire. We had people from north Africa and people from Italy on the island because we were an early point of habitation by the Roman empire when it was in this country.

I do feel that Black History Month is getting caught up in other issues and unnecessarily politicised, because it is a fascinating subject in its own right. It is not about silly slogans about decolonisation. It is not about the tedious debate about woke activism or the cancel culture eloquently described by my hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) and for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker). Nor is it solely about the drumbeat of slavery, although that is an important moral, economic and political issue.

On that point, until the UK abolished it, and however depressing it may be, slavery was a consistent norm in human experience. Our state, at the height of its power two centuries ago, used that power for an absolute moral good—manumission and the destruction of the international slave trade off west Africa. The West Africa Squadron, which used a considerable amount of the Royal Navy’s resources at the time, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) eloquently pointed out, was a unique vehicle in history. As part of the most powerful military institution of that era, the Royal Navy was used for an absolute moral good: the destruction of slavery.

Yes, our history is complex. At the time of destroying slavery, we were also accumulating an empire, so it is easy to make accusations of hypocrisy, but rather than standing here like some agitprop student politician, I would rather understand the past and the complex worlds that people living before us inhabited, because it can help guide our way, frankly, to a better future.

Richard Graham: On that point, my hon. Friend may be interested that we have only one major statue of a slaver in Gloucester. It happens to be the Emperor

Nerva of the Roman empire, who did indeed take slaves from the UK back to Italy. We have not done anything to daub him at all.

Bob Seely: I wonder whether some constituents from a couple of millennia ago were part of that trade—I hope not.

As a Trinidadian friend tells me, we do not help one group of people by pulling down others. Black history is fundamentally about so much more, whether it is the story of peoples such as the Windrush generation—I pay tribute to the extraordinary courage that people needed to get on that boat to come here from the Caribbean after world war two; it was an extraordinary thing—or individuals such as Mary Seacole, who was turned down by the War Office when she wanted to go and help British soldiers in Crimea. She got funding herself and went. Leading aircraftwoman Lilian Bader was the first black woman to join the armed forces in world war two. She ended up as a corporal. Joan Armatrading was the first ever UK artist to be nominated for a Grammy in the blues category. The first black peer was Lord Constantine. Trevor McDonald is incredibly well known. On the Isle of Wight, our modern cultural history will, I am sure, heavily feature Derek Sandy’s classic reggae “Welcome to the Isle of Wight”.

There is much to debate about genuine Black History Month, as opposed to politicised statements around race. On one side of the Chamber, I think we have had a rather negative view of our history, of humanity and of a world divided into oppressors and victims. On the Conservative Benches, I think we have had a rather more optimistic view of human nature. While humanity is not perfect, there is much to celebrate. I am very proud of this country, and I am proud of our record. Life is not perfect and nor are we, but the way we make that better is to understand the world, and I hope that is what Black History Month will help us do.

6.9 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this important debate.

I was born and brought up in Greenock, the main town of the constituency of Inverclyde. As a child it was just my home town. My main memory of the school trips to the local James Watt Museum was walking a friend, eyes closed, past the snarling stuffed bear, and certainly little of our colonial history. I never thought twice about the names of some of the streets I walked down—Jamaica Street, Antigua Street, Virginia Street—or what some of the merchants who built some of the larger houses in the town might have traded in.

Hidden in plain sight was another history of the place where I was growing up, because Greenock, like other ports, sadly played its part in the Atlantic slave trade. It was a port where traders carrying goods like iron and guns would depart to west Africa. These goods would be traded for enslaved people who were then transported to the Americas and sold in exchange for goods like sugar. As a child, the only sugar I was aware of in relation to Greenock was the Tate & Lyle refinery, and the wreck of the sugar boat MV Captayannis in the Firth of Clyde—the water was supposed to taste sweet round about it. That sugar was transported to the refineries of Greenock, and the warehouse, the Sugar Shed, still stands to this day.

That sugar, and the rum and tobacco, made some incredibly wealthy, but that wealth was not just kept in the pockets of the traders and their families: it is important that we acknowledge that it enriched all Scots and all parts of the UK. This was recently highlighted by the excellent blog and Twitter account, @WeirdScotland. Much of the philanthropy of the 18th and 19th centuries in Scotland, a lot of which admirably focused on promoting access to education, which we have talked about a lot today, was in fact funded by the slave trade. For example, the Royal Academy in Tain, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), was opened in 1813 by Hugh Rose Ross of Glastullich, a slaver funded by £175,000, in today's money, from donors in the Caribbean.

It is not just our places or our institutions but our people who have deep-rooted connections to the slave trade. The most famous Greenockian other than Victor Meldrew is James Watt. His father was a slave trader. While Watt did eventually argue for abolition, there is no doubt that he benefited from his father's wealth, and sold steam engines to plantations in the Caribbean. I highlight Shaun Kavanagh's excellent piece on Greenock's role in the slave trade, where he says:

"In Greenock, we live in the shadow of slavery every day."

How many people walk along the streets of Greenock, Glasgow, Edinburgh and elsewhere and fail to connect the dots—to realise the wealth realised via the slave trade?

Even Scotland's bard, Robert Burns, in dire financial straits, accepted a job as part of a team of white overseers on a plantation in Jamaica. As Clark McGinn has outlined, being a bookkeeper was as much about managing the assets as the numbers. Burns would have had a daily interface with the truth of slavery, from assisting in purchases through to recording punishments and deaths—and an ambitious young man might seek advancement by volunteering to be more hands on. The publication of Burns's poems, to instant acclaim, prevented his emigration and that future, but his story demonstrates how slavery permeated every part of Scottish life at that time.

We have to do so much more to educate ourselves about the horrors of the past, not least when, as has been demonstrated during the pandemic, the legacy of the unequal treatment of colour is still very much with us to this day. This year, Black Lives Matter has had a huge impact. In my semi-rural constituency of North East Fife, it has been the issue that my team and I have received the most correspondence about. I received many emails and letters on the murder of George Floyd, on the tragic death of Belly Mujinga and the campaign for justice for her, and on ensuring that black history is taught in our schools.

I have written to the Scottish Government about making sure that our curriculum is inclusive. I am concerned that potentially the diverse approach of the curriculum for excellence means that for some we will not be teaching that curriculum. Like others in this debate, I absolutely support the work of the Black Curriculum campaign and say that we do need a commitment that every child learns at school about Britain's role in the slave trade.

6.13 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I add my name to the long list of other Members who have thanked the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for securing this debate. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Before entering this place, I worked as a secondary school teacher and taught citizenship, history and religious education.

Black History Month was always celebrated in every single school I worked in. A variety of specific tutor activities, assemblies and lessons across all subjects were undertaken. This created a vibrant and inquisitive environment in which students discussed challenging topics. We also, in every school I worked in, taught about the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, ensuring that future generations understand that while history can be ugly, it is an opportunity to learn from the past.

I have also taught about apartheid in South Africa and the struggle for freedom and equality led by Nelson Mandela. I still today live with the goosebumps when I think of my visit, as a 17-year-old, to Robben Island, when we were toured around and heard the first-hand experiences of our tour guides, who had been, tragically, prisoners on that island. I even experienced the racism that, sadly, exists in South Africa when one of my teammates was chanted at with monkey noises as we played against one of the schools there, leading us to abandon the game early, and having our school, with our black head rugby coach, being refused entry to the premises to dine with the opposing players. As part of the curriculum, we also looked at Justin Fashanu, the first black footballer to command a transfer fee of £1 million and also the first professional footballer to come out as openly gay.

There is one individual to whom I want to give a special shout out—a former colleague of mine from Blackfen School for Girls in the London borough of Bexley, where I started my career. Lola Blatch is to this day the most gifted and inspirational teacher I have ever worked with. In the politics, philosophy and enterprise faculty that she ran, we delivered a citizenship curriculum that focused on challenging issues from the past to the present. From a scheme of work exploring the use of protest music and having students create their own song on a current political issue to hosting international evenings on which parents and pupils from all different cultural backgrounds would serve food, sing, dance and host a fashion show—celebrating our diversity as a community remains to this day one of the highlights of my career.

What Lola and I also did was to challenge students' thoughts and ideas. One of the schemes of work was to look at the murder of Stephen Lawrence. This murder took place not far from the school, and we examined the ways in which Stephen's family was wronged and reminded students what can happen when racism goes unchallenged. The curriculum's flexibility enabled Lola and I to tackle such wide-ranging and difficult topics. The aim of all our lessons was never to focus solely on the colour of someone's skin, but to see a person for who they are.

If I may, I will turn briefly to the area that I am proud to serve, which is Stoke-on-Trent North, Kids Grove and Talke. In the mother town of Burslem stands Wedgwood

[Jonathan Gullis]

House, an adorning reminder of one of our city's finest, Josiah Wedgwood, who was a prominent slave abolitionist. From 1787 until his death in 1795, Josiah Wedgwood actively participated in the cause of the abolition of slavery. His slave medallion brought public attention to abolition, and was the most famous image of a black person in all 18th-century arts. I know that his work on this matter is taught annually in schools across Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke, and I expect to see it continue for ever more to better inform future generations.

If we are to truly understand the contribution made to our history by people from the BAME community, we need to celebrate and share that history as a positive, rather than looking at what seeks to divide. When I faced down the British National party and the English Defence League in the London borough of Bexley after letters came in having a go at us for what we were teaching, it was about celebrating what was good and what brought us together, rather than about what divided us, and it is such divisions that those on the far right wish to create between us.

6.17 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this very important debate.

I am proud to represent one of the most diverse constituencies in the country. It is a constituency with one of the largest Caribbean and African communities in the UK and has a very direct connection with the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948. In 2018, the same year that we celebrated the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush, many of my constituents also found themselves victims of the Windrush scandal and suffered the terrible, deep emotional pain of rejection by the place that they had understood to be their country.

It is that experience that reinforced my belief in the urgent need for reform of the history curriculum. The Windrush scandal was caused by the callous policies of a Tory Government, but addressing it was harder than it should have been because far too many people in government and beyond did not have an accurate understanding of British history or, as a consequence, of Britishness. There was a catastrophic failure to understand that the Windrush generation had come to the UK as British citizens under the British Nationality Act 1948. Addressing the Windrush scandal was not about regularising the status of Commonwealth citizens who had come to the UK in the decades following the second world war, but about recognising their status as British citizens; a status that they had always had.

One of the recommendations made by Wendy Williams in her lessons learned review following the Windrush scandal was that all existing and new staff in the Home Office should learn about the history of the UK and its relationship with the rest of the world, including Britain's colonial history, the history of inward and outward migration, and the history of black Britons. If such a programme is important for the staff in the Home Office, surely it is important for every child being educated in British schools to understand that we are a nation of

migrants, that every community and every family has a migration story, that every historical event can be seen from a range of different perspectives and that telling the story of everyone who was there matters. These things help us to find what we have in common and help to build cohesion. In our divided society, that is more important than ever.

Curriculum reform is not difficult. There are brilliant resources readily available. I mention in particular "Our Migration Story" developed by the Runnymede Trust, the universities of Manchester and Cambridge and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Black Curriculum and existing GCSE modules by Edexcel and AQA, currently taught to less than 10% of students. I want to mention the fantastic work by Lambeth Council to improve the attainment of black students in the borough under the banner "Raising the Game". This month, it distributed Patrick Vernon's brilliant new book, "100 Great Black Britons" to every school in the borough. Curriculum reform is simply about taking this good practice and ensuring that every child in the UK is able to benefit from it.

I want to say a word in support of the Black Cultural Archives, based on Windrush Square in Brixton in my constituency. The BCA is the only national organisation dedicated to the collection, preservation and celebration of the history of black people in the UK. It has an incredible resource and a national remit, yet is not currently funded directly by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport or afforded the status of a national archive.

I call on the Government to deliver curriculum reform and to fully fund and resource the Black Cultural Archives in its vital work. Black history is British history and it should be taught and available to everyone all year round.

6.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): To be number 60 on the speaking list and to get in is quite an achievement, so thank you for the opportunity, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for setting the scene and I thank hon. Members for some absolutely wonderful contributions, which I have been greatly heartened by.

As an Ulster Scot, I believe I am very much British to the core—as I think Margaret Thatcher said, I am more British than Finchley. I am hoping that that will be the case; we will know within the next few months whether that will be the case or not.

Our history as members of this great diverse UK—England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—is about instilling the belief that, regardless of differences in class, colour or culture, we are unified in our Britishness, which is only enhanced by our differences. I believe we are better together, but it is not just that—it is all the cultures coming together, to make this great nation, which we have the privilege to be part of.

I believe that black history is British history, in the same way that Ulster Scots history is British history. I commend the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers). She held an Adjournment debate one night on this very issue, and set the scene and the tone extremely well. There were also some wonderful contributions from other Members to that debate.

Martin Luther King is a hero of mine. He made some wonderful comments. He was a man of God and also a man who had a social conscience—a person who spoke up for other people. That always intrigued me. That is probably the reason why Dr Paisley, who formerly sat in this House, was a person with whom I resonated as a young boy in the late '60s and early '70s, as he spoke up for others.

Martin Luther King said that people should “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

That is a lesson that I believe every school should teach and that every single adult in this place must put into practice. Those words should be in the hearts of each and every one of us here. I think that is the message we want to send out from this place tonight.

I am very much a part of a shared history. I am very much from a Unionist tradition and an Orange culture. I belong to all of the loyalist organisations—the Orange Institution, the Royal Black Preceptory and the Apprentice Boys, but at school in the late '60s and early '70s in my class, one of the teachers said, “Would you like to learn Irish history?” The response from the class was, yes, we would. It did not change me as a Unionist and was never going to, because I am a deep Unionist through and through—it is in the core of my body—but it did give me a perspective on another history. It is important to have that perspective and to know about the Irish part of history that we have in our island. For me, the celebration of 12 July is not designed to detract from any other cultures.

The celebration of Black History Month is the opportunity to be grateful for the tremendous achievements of this section of the British people, including the Windrush generation, who have done so much to bring the UK to where it is—together. That black history is my history, too; I want to put that on record. I see black history as British history, along with my history as an Ulster Scot. I hope this debate will enable us all across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to recognise that we are different, but that we are also the same, not just in the way we breathe and the blood in our bodies, but because we are British.

6.24 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for securing what has been such a rich debate. Celebrating and raising awareness of black history through Black History Month has been shown to be urgently necessary in light of the growing anger of our black community expressed through Black Lives Matter and how the Government are approaching our own history on slavery and reparations.

We need the Government to be an honest broker in our history without an attempt to whitewash history or belittle the oppression of black communities in the Americas or Africa. Unfortunately, we see the opposite in our cultural institutions. The Museum of the Home, formerly the Geffrye Museum, in Hackney, was named after Sir Robert Geffrye, a slave trader. The museum has a statue of Geffrye, and after consultation there was a very strong feeling that it should be removed. The decision should be made entirely by the museum, which has curatorial freedom and a responsibility to listen to the local community. However, the Secretary of State

for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport decided to intervene in the decision by writing to all museums with arm's length bodies arrangements. The letter seemed particularly aimed at the Museum of the Home and was quite extraordinary in its tone and overreach.

The letter said:

“Statues and other historical objects were created by generations with different perspectives and understandings of right and wrong.”

I am not sure that many see the enslavement of others as a matter of perspective or understanding of right and wrong. The Secretary of State went on to say:

“It is for this reason that the Government does not support the removal of statues or other similar objects.”

Then comes the implied threat to funding:

“As set out in your Management Agreements, I would expect Arm's Length Bodies' approach to issues of contested heritage to be consistent with the Government's position... This is especially important as we enter a challenging Comprehensive Spending Review, in which all government spending will rightly be scrutinised.”

Appearing before the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the museum director, Sonia Solicari, said that the board had taken the letter “very seriously”, adding that the Department is “a major stakeholder” for the museum so it took that on board in the decision-making process.

Local people in Hackney were appalled. I spoke to Jermain Jackman today, who chairs the Hackney Young Futures Commission, and he told me: “When the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol was pulled down, the Government called the protests out for not allowing the democratic process. However, Hackney allowed and followed a democratic process, consulting the local community, which was overwhelmingly in favour of having it removed. However, the Government put pressure on the board and ignored the will of the people.” Jermain is correct. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is moving the goalposts, and to whose detriment?

The Museums Association puts it best in its statement:

“The letter is the latest in a series of interventions from the culture secretary that have led to fears the government is undermining the sector's independence.”

Those are its words, not mine.

I also want to talk about an episode of black history that, sadly, is rarely taught in our academic institutions or schools: the oppression and genocide of the West Papuans under Indonesian occupation. As chair of the all-party group on West Papua, it is incumbent on me to add their struggle to those of so many black and indigenous ones around the world.

This year, following the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, the West Papuans found inspiration to link their struggle with those struggles under the slogan “Papuan lives matter.” The campaigners shed light on Indonesia's institutional racism against West Papuans. For instance, in August 2019 Papuan students were attacked in Indonesia's second largest city and called monkeys. The police then rounded up the students firing tear gas into their dormitory. In 2006 in Jayapura everyone who had dreadlocks was arrested and their hair was cut. This continued for a fortnight. *The Jakarta Post* last year discussed Papuans living in Yogyakarta and said that it was not unusual for landlords to express approval of rent applications by phone only to reject them once they find out where they are from.

[Alex Sobel]

These and many other incidents of racism will chime with many of my colleagues in the Chamber, and they reflect how many black communities in the UK were treated in the past.

West Papuan leaders, including Benny Wenda, chair of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, have sought political asylum around the world. Benny Wenda is a brilliant exponent for his people and needs to be platformed much more here in the UK where he lives so that light can be shone on what is happening to the West Papuan people.

Finally, I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead for securing this opportunity that has enabled me to add my voice to those of my many black colleagues in the Chamber whom I am honoured to serve alongside.

6.29 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this debate. I have had a number of messages from my SNP colleagues asking me to pass on their congratulations. The hon. Member said that she came to this place to speak for those who barely get a mention; I want her to know that it has not gone unnoticed, and I know that it will mean so much to the people she was referring to. Sometimes, even if we are not able to change things immediately for people, just knowing that we are fighting their corner makes a difference—although we want to change things, obviously.

I want to say something about the what, the why and the who of Black History Month. What does Black History Month mean to me? To me, much as I love it, I wish that it did not have to happen, and if we incorporated black history into the teaching of our past, not just in schools but generally, and decolonised that teaching, perhaps Black History Month would be redundant, but we have not and until we do, Black History Month is essential. There have been really good speeches from Members on both sides of the House today. I think that Government Members have sometimes been a bit sensitive, but they should not be, because the fault lies with all of us. It is just about being honest in our teaching. Our stories are told from one perspective—the perspective of the colonisers—but how did it look from the perspective of the colonised? The missing perspectives are what decolonising the teaching of history is all about.

In addition to that, what about the black historical figures who get nothing like the attention that the equivalent white figures get? We should not pick and choose like that. One of the best examples I can provide is Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole, who has been mentioned multiple times today, to my delight. Both should have been taught about and I would argue that Scots-Jamaican Mary Seacole has more reason for us to learn about her, because everything that she did, she had to make happen. She had to fundraise, as we heard earlier, to get to the Crimea and to set up her hospital. It cannot have been easy in those days. I am pretty sure that our teachers are expected to teach about leadership, resilience and entrepreneurship, and Mary Seacole did an equivalent thing to Florence Nightingale in a different way and exemplified all the things that I just mentioned.

But for hundreds of years, we did not learn about her, did we? It is about choosing not to be selective in whose incredible achievements we recognise, and it is about choosing not to tell our stories from the perspective of the coloniser only.

Why is this so important? Because until we change, the idea that seeps into a child's subconscious is that the world was built and developed by white people. It seeps in because they are sitting in class, or reading a book, or watching TV, and learning about the wonderful women who nursed those soldiers, and the great inventors, artists, poets, scholars, writers, and philosophers. They see these incredible people and they are all white, but they were not all white. Those children may not be sitting consciously thinking, "Hmm, all the great people are white", but as I said, it seeps in. For the black child, they are in danger of growing up believing on some level that the white people of the world must be cleverer, more talented and more relevant. For the white child, how can they possibly avoid growing up believing on some level that it must be true, and that white people, having built the world all by themselves, must be somehow superior?

And here is the why: racism is rooted in untruthful or selective teaching about our past. People are not born racist. They learn it. Like the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), I often hear people saying, "I don't see skin colour." I know what they are trying to say, but yes, they do. Young children, however, do not seem to notice skin colour any more than they see eye colour or hair colour. They learn to be racist. We as a society collectively teach them to be racist, but if black children and white children learn about the world from the perspective of all ethnicities, and they see and hear about the people of all ethnicities who have made their contribution to developing our world, and if what seeps into their psyche is more truthful, we will not stop racism, but I am convinced we will reduce it.

So on to the who—who am I talking about? I do not have time to list everyone I want to, so instead I will table a series of early-day motions till the end of October featuring a different figure in black history each time. I have started already and I invite friends across the House to join me in doing that. However, I do want to talk about one person in particular: Andrew Watson, a Scots-Guyanese, who was the first black professional footballer on these islands. He was also an engineer, so he was a high achiever.

Mr Steve Baker: Hear, hear.

Anne McLaughlin: Spoken like a true engineer. His highest achievement, however, was that he played for the Scotland football team on three occasions, captaining the side in his first match. Most importantly, Scotland won each game. [Interruption.] The consensus and smiles may disappear in a moment, when I tell the House that the first of those matches was played at the Oval in Kennington, where he led his team to a 6-1 victory over England. In the next match, we beat Wales 5-1, and in his final international, we beat England again, but sadly, that time it was only 5-1. That is really why he is my hero.

However, I knew nothing about this man until about 10 years ago. There were efforts to get him recognised, and indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) once made a documentary about Andrew Watson, in conjunction with celebrated

broadcaster and journalist—and my friend and constituent—Stuart Cosgrove, who is also an author. As an aside, his latest book is about Cassius Clay. Andrew Watson is now memorialised in the hall of fame at Scotland’s national stadium in Hampden, but why do special efforts and campaigns have to happen for people to be recognised? As the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) explained, it took 12 years to get the statue of Mary Seacole. Do you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that 80,000 people lined the banks of the Thames to celebrate Mary Seacole when she returned from the Crimean war? How on earth did we manage to whitewash her out of history until recently? Why did it take a campaign to recognise her?

Most people do not wish to be racist, I believe—most of it is simply down to not knowing or not understanding. Part of our job here is to help them, and I invite Members to join the all-party group on unconscious bias, which I co-chair with my friend the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who gave a brilliant speech and tolerated the nonsense from Government Members extremely well. Our first investigation is on unconscious racial bias, which we will launch shortly—I will send an email about it.

Yes, progress has been made, but it is not enough. I will share a story with Members. My 17-year-old goddaughter Toniann texted me yesterday, saying, “I’m in class and I’m watching Uncle Graham on TV.” Toniann’s mum is white Scottish and her dad is black Jamaican. Uncle Graham is my partner, who was featured in a BBC documentary made by Stewart Kyasimire called “Black and Scottish”. It is on iPlayer, and I urge Members to watch it—it is absolutely brilliant. Here is a child of Scottish Jamaican descent seeing black role models featured in her education, and she was absolutely delighted. The icing on the cake was that she was related to one of them.

The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) noted the decision by Glasgow University to make reparation for the way in which it benefited from the Caribbean slave trade.

Adam Afriyie: The hon. Lady is making a fantastic speech. I am fascinated by the APPG on unconscious bias. Could her first inquiry be on the unconscious bias of the SNP against the English?

Anne McLaughlin: Maybe we will change the inquiry—I need to speak to the hon. Member for Brent North, but perhaps we will change it to the conscious bias of the SNP against the Tories. [*Interruption.*] Did I hear Conservatives saying, “Hear, hear”? Thank you.

Glasgow University is making reparations for the way in which it benefited from the slave trade. It was the aforementioned Uncle Graham, in his role as chair of Flag Up Scotland Jamaica, of which I am a board member, who approached Glasgow University to suggest that it do that, and it is a lesson in life that if you do not ask, you do not get. The university, to its credit, agreed almost immediately, secured the services of historian Dr Stephen Mullen, did its sums and set about a fantastic reparation programme that is about much, much more than just the money.

I want to end by saying something about tolerance. I have heard too many Members talk about racial tolerance today and how Britain is tolerant. I want to gently but

firmly urge them to be careful about their use of that word, or be prepared to explain who exactly we are tolerating and what exactly they do that requires tolerance. Language really matters and we should all, including me, be ready to examine our own.

6.38 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I am truly honoured to close this debate for the official Opposition. I want to begin by congratulating my friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on securing this important debate and thanking the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Members have heard that this is the first debate in the House on Black History Month for five years. I hope that we do not have to wait another five years to have another such debate, because the House should always have time to consider and debate issues of great importance. We have heard speeches and contributions from dozens of hon. and right hon. Members across the House which, for the most part, have been good-natured. There were a few parts of the debate that were not so. Many Members have shared stories from their communities, including my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who is not in her place now. She discussed Dr Pitt, who stood for Labour in an election in the 1950s and was the second black person to become a Lord. My hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead gave a powerful opening speech about the importance of Black History Month and why we need to celebrate it. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) shared her experience of growing up in the ’80s and the education she had. She also cited Mary Seacole, as have many other Members in this debate.

Black History Month has been celebrated every year in the UK since 1987. That was also a historic year because it was the year we elected the first three black MPs to this place: the late Bernie Grant, Paul Boateng and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). In Black History Month we aim to highlight and celebrate the contributions of black people who may not be part of the black history or our curriculum.

This Black History Month is even more important, as we face the global health pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, which has shone a light on some of the structural racial inequalities experienced by black people here in the UK and around the world. The tragic murder of George Floyd by white police officers in the United States ignited a global show of solidarity through the Black Lives Matter protests. Thousands of people from different backgrounds came together to demand fundamental change and challenge the racial injustices in Britain today. Racism is a systemic problem and requires systemic solutions. As my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) said, it is not enough for someone merely to say that they are not racist; they have to be an anti-racist.

It starts with knowing our history, as so many Members across the House have said today. My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) gave us such a great history of Caribbean politics and sport, telling us all about the great Michael Manley, the Jamaican Prime Minister. My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) cited the history of

[*Marsha De Cordova*]

the transatlantic slave trade and the fight of those enslaved who fought for freedom. He rightly cited the injustices and disparities that exist.

We should celebrate our history and be proud of our history. As many have said throughout this debate, black history is British history. We should be proud of people like the abolitionist Mary Prince, who was the first black woman to write her own story in her book published in 1831. We should be proud that the first pan-African conference took place just down the road in Westminster town hall in 1900, and was attended by people from Africa, the West Indies and US, including John Archer, who I shall come back to shortly.

I want us all to know about the thousands and thousands of black people who fought for our country in the first world war and succeeding wars, including the men who served in the British West Indies Regiment in 1915. The Windrush generation made such great contributions to our society. Many of them were among the first to work in the NHS, including members of my own family.

In the 1960s, Paul Stephenson, alongside Roy Hackett, Guy Bailey and many others, challenged racism and discrimination and led the Bristol bus boycott, which lasted four months until the company backed down and overturned the colour bar. This is all part of our history—our British history. The boycott helped to influence the passing of the Race Relations Acts of 1965, 1968 and 1976, all of which were passed by Labour Governments, of course.

We will never forget the tragic murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and the institutional racism that surrounded the investigation and led to the long fight for justice of our friend Baroness Lawrence and her family.

Whether we know it or not, we are all affected by those who have gone before us. I myself am proud to stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before me, including some of the greats who represented Battersea, such as John Archer who, when elected mayor of Battersea in 1913, became London's first black mayor, and who rightly cited his election as a pivotal moment. One of the first Asian MPs was elected in Battersea in 1922: Shapurji Saklatvala. I do indeed stand on the shoulders of many greats.

We all need to know about, and be able to talk about, Britain's colonial past and the structural racism that continues to exist. Although we have made progress, we still have some way to go. As has been cited by many this afternoon, black workers with degrees still earn around 23% less than their white counterparts; Caribbean children are still three times more likely to be excluded from school; and black men are more than nine times more likely to be stopped and searched, and a disproportionate number are dying in police custody.

It matters that we understand and acknowledge those things. The Wendy Williams "Windrush Lessons Learned" review made it clear that it was possible for the Windrush scandal to happen in part because of the public's poor understanding of Britain's colonial history, our history of inward and outward migration, and the history of black Britons. We need to learn, and we need justice for the thousands of people from the Windrush generation, many of whom lost their homes, their livelihoods and, in some cases, tragically, their lives.

We need justice for the black people whose deaths could have been avoided during this pandemic, and we need action to address the hugely disproportionate impact that coronavirus is still having on our black, Asian and minority ethnic communities right now. This Government have so far failed to implement many of Public Health England's recommendations. The countless families who have lost loved ones, and their communities, should not have to wait any longer. That is why Labour has set out the need for a race equality strategy that takes lessons from the covid-19 virus pandemic and seeks fundamentally to change the systems and institutions in which these structural racial inequalities exist.

Today, I call on the Minister to say that she will urgently look to implement a race equality strategy, which includes fundamental reform of the national curriculum—as cited by so many hon. Friends, including my hon. Friends the Members for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), for Streatham, for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and so many others—so that it includes an honest account of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade.

Will the Minister commit not just to a review of the curriculum, but to a strategy that addresses racial disparities, such as those mentioned by the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes)? I will hold to account the Women and Equalities Committee, which she chairs, to ensure that we start to see mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting. Will the Minister commit to a strategy that seeks to implement the many recommendations that have been made concerning racial inequalities, whether in the McGregor-Smith review, the Lammy review, Wendy Williams's lessons learned review or countless others? Will she commit to a strategy that seeks to recognise all our different ethnicities within black, Asian and minority ethnic communities? There is so much more that this Government can and should do, and now is the time to act.

We continue to celebrate Black History Month, and we will continue to celebrate black history, because, as Marcus Garvey says,

"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots."

Each of us in this House has a role to play to stand for and demand that change. Black history is British history.

6.48 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): I am pleased to be standing at the Dispatch Box to close this much needed debate on Black History Month. I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Opong-Asare), who has managed to be both a Front Bencher and a Back Bencher today; that is quite a feat. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and giving me an opportunity to speak on an issue that is very close to my heart, and I thank all the hon. and right hon. Members who have made thoughtful contributions. I will speak as quickly as I can, and I am afraid I will not be able to reference every speech, but I think that this has been a fantastic debate.

This year, more so than for decades, race has been at the heart of our national conversation. Black History Month remains an opportunity to shine a light on those whose contributions to our national history deserve to be better known. This month, the Government have taken the opportunity to celebrate the contribution of black Britons who enrich our collective national life and form an inseparable part of our national history—women such as Yvonne Conolly, who in 1969 became the UK's first black female headteacher. Throughout her 40-year career, she has inspired and mentored generations of educators. The work of Ms Conolly and her fellow heads is key to the topic that we are debating. Education is key to our mission as a Government to level up and spread opportunity to everyone, whatever their background.

Many hon. Members have said that they want more black history to be taught, but they do not seem to be aware of what is actually on the curriculum. Our curriculum is not that of 50, 40 or even 20 years ago. Children today can learn about the British empire and colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade and its abolition, and how our history has been shaped by people of all ethnicities. They also have the opportunity to study non-European cultures such as Mughal India and the Benin empire, which is where my ancestors decided to take over the world in their own way. Pupils can currently study migration, empires and the people in the AQA history GCSE, but the hon. Member for Ilford North (West Streeting) is quite wrong to say that that is the only place that it can be learned, as many other exam bodies offer that.

Our curriculum does not need to be decolonised, for the simple reason that it is not colonised. We should not apologise for the fact that British children primarily study the history of these islands. It goes without saying that the recent fad to decolonise maths, decolonise engineering and decolonise the sciences that we have seen across our universities—to make race the defining principle of what is studied—is not just misguided but actively opposed to the fundamental purpose of education. The curriculum, by its very nature, is limited; there are a finite number of hours to teach any subject. What we have not heard in this debate, from hon. Members on both sides of the House who want more added to it, is what must necessarily be taken out. Perhaps we will get to that another day.

The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and many others have raised the Black Lives Matter movement. The hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) raised the education guidance and believes that we are trying to stop children becoming activists. Another hon. Member—apologies; I have forgotten who it was—also mentioned that. What we are against is the teaching of contested political ideas as if they are accepted facts. We do not do that with communism, socialism or capitalism.

I want to speak about a dangerous trend in race relations that has come far too close to home in my life, which is the promotion of critical race theory, an ideology that sees my blackness as victimhood and their whiteness as oppression. I want to be absolutely clear that the Government stand unequivocally against critical race theory. Some schools have decided to openly support the anti-capitalist Black Lives Matter group, often fully aware that they have a statutory duty to be politically impartial.

Of course black lives matter, but we know that the Black Lives Matter movement is political. I know that because, at the height of the protests, I have been told of white Black Lives Matter protesters calling a black armed police officer guarding Downing Street—I apologise for saying this word—"a pet nigger". That is why we do not endorse that movement on this side of the House. It is a political movement. It would be nice if Opposition Members condemned many of the actions of that political movement, instead of pretending that it is a completely wholesome anti-racist organisation.

Lots of pernicious stuff is being pushed, and we stand against that. We do not want teachers to teach their white pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt. Let me be clear that any school that teaches those elements of critical race theory as fact, or that promotes partisan political views such as defunding the police without offering a balanced treatment of opposing views, is breaking the law.

Hon. Members have mentioned the police. Our history is our own; it is not America's. Too often, those who campaign against racial inequality import wholesale a narrative and assumptions that have nothing to do with this country's history and have no place on these islands. Our police force is not their police force. Since its establishment by Robert Peel, our police force has operated on the principle of policing by consent. It gives me tremendous pride to live, in 2020, in a nation where the vast majority of our police officers are still unarmed.

On the history of black people in Britain, again, our history of race is not America's. Most black British people who came to our shores were not brought here in chains, but came voluntarily because of their connections to the UK and in search of a better life. I should know: I am one of them. We have our own joys and sorrows to tell. From the Windrush generation to the Somali diaspora, it is a story that is uniquely ours. If we forget that story and replace it with an imported Americanised narrative of slavery, segregation and Jim Crow, we erase the history of not only black Britain, but of every other community that has contributed to society and that has also been a victim of racism or discrimination, from the Pakistani community to the Jewish community.

I have listened to Opposition Members talk about a race equality strategy. They know that the Government have set up a Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, but they have not engaged with it. They do not want a race equality strategy; they want the Government to adopt their race equality strategy, and that is not what we are doing.

Marsha De Cordova *rose*—

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid that I do not have enough time to give way.

We won an election a year ago. If Opposition Members want to implement their race equality strategy, they should go ahead and win an election. If they win the support of the British people, they can have their way, but at the moment this is a Conservative Government and we are going to do this in the way in which we believe the people of this country want.

Marsha De Cordova *rose*—

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid that I am not giving way. I have only three minutes left, and I have more than three minutes of content.

The hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) said that she hoped I would learn something from her. Now it is time for me to give her a couple of lessons too, although I do not believe that she is in her place. She said that we need to look at history and improve it. Lesson No. 1: we cannot improve history; we can only learn from it. What we can improve is the future, and that is what this Government have been doing over the past 10 years. I am not going to reel off statistics, in the interests of time, because other Government Members have already done so.

Lesson No. 2: black history is not the history of institutional racism. Listening to some Members across the House, it is quite clear that they do not know the difference. It is not true, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) said, that African history was interrupted by slavery. It also shows an ignorance of geography, because west African history is different from African history. As probably the only Member of this House who actually grew up and went to school in Africa, I can tell the House that that is not what we are taught. Much more is taught about the history of black slave traders who existed before and after the transatlantic slave trade.

In fact, the most notable statue in the city of Lagos, where I grew up, is that of Madam Tinubu. It is the biggest one in the equivalent of Trafalgar Square. She was a slave trader, but she was also a freedom fighter and a much loved icon. Her slave trading is not celebrated, but her fight against colonisers is. In Nigeria, she is recognised as a complex character, as all historical figures are—and heaven help anyone who would try to pull her statue down. There is much that we can learn from Nigeria about how to handle the issue of statues.

Why does this issue mean so much to me? It is not just because I am a first-generation immigrant. It is because my daughter came home from school this month and said to me, “We’re learning Black History Month because every other month is about white history.” That is wrong and it is not what our children should be picking up. Those are not the values that I have taught her. They are yet another sign of the pernicious identity politics that look at individuals primarily as groups of biological characteristics. People often do not realise when that has taken hold, and I know that many of them are well meaning.

I wanted to finish with the story of Tom Molineaux, a black boxer who freed himself from slavery in the US and moved to England in 1809. I would have said so much more about him, but I am almost out of time.

History tells us that this is a country that welcomes people, and that black people from all over the world have found this to be a great and welcoming country.

As a black woman, these are the values that I am teaching my black daughter. We must never take that for granted. In this Black History Month, let us celebrate the black talent that we are blessed with, the progress we have made in accepting one another and the contribution that black people have made in making us who we are as a nation.

6.58 pm

Abena Opong-Asare: I thank the Backbench Business Committee again, and all Members of the House who contributed to this debate. It has been an engaging debate and I hope that it will continue. I also thank members of the public for responding to my call about what I should discuss in the debate—I have met so many engaged people—and for recommending trailblazers for me to mention in the House today. I am sorry if I was not able to mention every one; there are just so many trailblazers out there, and we just need to learn all about them.

Let me emphasise again that we really do need a race equality strategy and an action plan, and to diversify the curriculum. We must listen to the public. So many people have signed the petition asking us to diversify the curriculum. This is not about political point scoring; it is about listening to what the public say their needs are, and looking at the stats that are out there. Loads of research has poured out, with teachers asking for the curriculum to be diversified.

This is not about identity politics; it is about understanding the true history of our nation in the UK, because we can move forward only if we learn the good and the ugly sides of politics. This is not about glossing politics and making it pretty. This is not about attacking white people or anyone else because of their politics. This is about learning our true history, because it is absolutely important that we understand it so that we are able to move forward and progress.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am going to put the Question, because I think it is right that I should, but technically I should not, because it is 7 pm.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Black History Month.

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 four minutes.

7 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update

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

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

Mr Speaker: Before the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care addresses the Chamber, I would like to point out that a British Sign Language interpretation of the statement is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

7.4 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on coronavirus. The virus remains a perilous threat. Yesterday, Europe recorded its 7 millionth coronavirus case. Deaths in Germany and Italy have doubled in seven days, and here, today's Office for National Statistics figures show that weekly deaths linked to coronavirus have risen to their highest level since the start of July. Cases among the over-60s continue to rise, and as the deputy chief medical officer Jonathan Van-Tam made clear earlier, it is the penetration of coronavirus into older age groups that gives the NHS the greatest cause for concern.

We must act where the virus is spreading. In the parts of the country where it is spreading the fastest, it is our sombre duty to take the action necessary to protect people's lives and protect the NHS. Coronavirus is not a short-term problem that can easily be fixed. It requires difficult decisions in these difficult times. Our goal is to get life back to as normal as possible, to support the NHS, to keep children at school and to shelter the economy as much as possible, and to do that by suppressing the virus until a vaccine is available.

It has been clear for some days that further action is needed across parts of England. Last Monday, we were able to reach an agreement with the leadership of Liverpool city region, across party lines, to take the action needed, with a package of financial support and co-operation. Yesterday, I announced to the House a similar agreement reached with Lancashire. In Lancashire, Liverpool and across the country, we continue to work closely with local leadership.

In Greater Manchester, there have been more coronavirus infections already in October than in July, August and September combined. The average daily hospital admissions in Greater Manchester are now higher than they were on 26 March, and there are now more covid-19 patients in Greater Manchester hospitals than in the whole of the south-west and south-east combined. As a result, we need to take further action to protect lives and livelihoods in Greater Manchester.

So, informed by that data, we have made the difficult decision to place Greater Manchester into the very high local covid alert level, coming into force at one minute past midnight on Friday. This means that pubs and bars must close, unless they are serving substantial meals; households cannot mix indoors or in most outdoor settings; in some public outdoor spaces, groups must be limited to the rule of six; and we strongly advise against travel into and out of the area. In line with the extra measures taken in Lancashire, casinos, bingo halls, betting shops, adult gaming centres and soft play areas must also close.

I know that these restrictions are tough, so we are putting in place a comprehensive package of support. That includes the job support scheme, which ensures that those affected by business closures are still paid. Once topped up with universal credit, those on low incomes will receive at least 80% of their normal income. We have also made available up to £465 million to help local authorities implement and enforce restrictions. Greater Manchester will receive £22 million of that. We will also work with local authorities to allocate testing and introduce local contact tracing.

Over the past 10 days, we have sought to reach an agreement with local leaders. Unfortunately, we were not able to reach an agreement in Greater Manchester, as we have in Lancashire and the Liverpool city region. As well as the support that I have outlined, we made a generous and extensive offer to support Manchester's businesses. That offer was proportionate to the support we have given the Liverpool city region and Lancashire, but regrettably, the Mayor rejected it. Of course, we do not want businesses in Greater Manchester to be disadvantaged, so that offer remains on the table. Our door is open to further discussions with local leaders in the coming days about business support.

I understand the impact of these measures, but we must take these decisions to save lives and, ultimately, livelihoods in Greater Manchester. To everyone in Greater Manchester, I say this: throughout these difficult times for your great city, we will be by your side. The best thing we can do now to protect our loved ones and get back to normal as fast as possible is for everyone to come together and follow these new rules and for all to play their part in tackling this deadly virus.

The path through a pandemic is never straightforward. It requires all of us to make difficult decisions and tough sacrifices to get the virus under control. I know that these local restrictions are hard and are another sacrifice, in a year full of sacrifices, but we must not waver now. We must persevere, as we work so hard on the long-term solutions that will see us through, and come together, once again, so that we can look after the people and the communities we love. I commend this statement to the House.

7.10 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): As always, I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, but I am afraid that tonight people across Manchester, the boroughs of Greater Manchester and towns such as Stockport, Leigh and Bury, where I grew up, will be watching the news in disbelief and they will be worried if they are affected by these closures. They will be asking, "Why was it right to cover 80% of wages in March and then now, in the run-up to Christmas, to cover just two thirds of wages in October?" What happened to that Chancellor who plastered across social media soft-focus selfies boasting that he would support jobs and incomes and do "whatever it takes"? Tonight, that Chancellor is forcing people on the national minimum wage to live on just £5.76 an hour. He has gone from "whatever it takes" to now taking from the lowest paid. How does he expect families to pay the bills and the rent, to put food on the table and to pay for school lunches when a third of their income has been snatched away, literally overnight? Where is the Chancellor? He should be here to defend the consequences of his decisions, which will mean a winter of hardship across the north.

[Jonathan Ashworth]

I grew up in Greater Manchester. My dad worked in casinos in Salford and my mum worked in bars in Manchester. I know that across Manchester people will want to do the right thing, but they will not be able to if a third of their income is stripped away. The leaders of Greater Manchester were prepared to compromise. They offered to settle for £65 million to support jobs and livelihoods, but the Government insisted on £60 million. Rather than finding the £5 million extra, the Prime Minister pulled the plug on negotiations and then this afternoon took £38 million off the table. What a petty, vindictive, callous response in a national crisis. The Prime Minister may think he is punishing the politicians, but in fact he is punishing the people of Greater Manchester. This is the Prime Minister who has blown £150 million on face masks that were not suitable for frontline NHS staff, blown £130 million on testing kits that turned out to be unsafe and had to be recalled, and is spending £7,000 a day on consultants as part of his failing £12 billion Test and Trace programme.

Given that Test and Trace is broken and the virus is out of control, I have always accepted that greater containment measures are needed, but for measures to be effective they need to command the consent of the people impacted and people need to know how long these measures will last. The Secretary of State did not tell us that in his statement.

Yet these restrictions have been called into question by the chief medical officer, who said that they will not be enough, and they are restrictions that the Prime Minister admitted last week give us only “a chance” to bring the national R down. So how will the sacrifices that the Prime Minister is forcing on the people in the north bring down infection rates in the south?

The Secretary of State knows that, to bring the R below 1, further measures will be needed. He knows that more areas are likely to go into tier 3. This is about so much more than Greater Manchester. People will watch tonight and say that if the Government are prepared to inflict this level of harm on their people in the middle of a pandemic in one part of the country, they will be prepared to do it to people in all parts of the country. The result will be a winter of hardship for millions of people. This is not a game; it is about people's lives. People need proper financial support. This is a national crisis and we will not defeat this virus on the cheap.

Matt Hancock: I regret that the hon. Member, who so often is so reasonable, is choosing to play political games with political rhetoric tonight. As I said in my statement, the offer of support is on the table. To the people of Greater Manchester, I say that the offer of the same support as was agreed with the Labour leadership of the Liverpool city region, and I commend them for their work, and the leadership of Lancashire, and I commend them for their work, is and remains on the table. I look forward in the coming days to working with the local councils right across Greater Manchester and, of course, the Mayor, if he is willing to come back to the table, to make sure we have that package of support for businesses in place.

Crucially, it is incumbent on us all to send the same public health messages to our constituents, wherever we represent around the country, but in particular in areas

where cases are rising, as in Greater Manchester, to ensure that we are clear about the part that everybody needs to play to keep this virus under control. The public are looking for that sort of public health messaging, rather than political games, in these difficult times.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I think it is fair to say that the shadow Secretary of State has been moderate. He has not repeated his party leader's call for a national lockdown, and people in areas where the virus has not jumped up very high will be grateful for that.

My father's family came from Greater Manchester, and were they there now I think they would ask that the Mayor make an agreement with the Government, because public help and public health go together. If it is a proportionate offer, we have not heard the reason why it is inadequate in one place. If we want employment in the future, we need to have employers, and help is going to be needed for those who need and are struggling to keep their businesses going.

I want to make one more point to my right hon. Friend. Down in Worthing, we are not getting our test results back all the time very fast. It is important that we do, because a father or mother who has a child who may have symptoms may not be able to go to work as a teacher, and that ends up penalising all the children in the class. I hope my right hon. Friend will be able to say what is happening.

Matt Hancock: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, who puts it very clearly: the people of Greater Manchester would expect their local leaders to come to the table. That offer of support for local businesses remains there, alongside the support for strengthening test and trace and enforcement in Greater Manchester. I urge all the leaders of the nine boroughs of Greater Manchester to pick up the phone and work with us to make sure we can deliver this. Of course, that offer remains open for the Mayor if he wants to return to the table.

On the point about the testing in Worthing, I will absolutely look into whether there was a specific problem. The test turnaround times have come down as the capacity has rapidly expanded, and I will make sure I get back to my hon. Friend as soon as possible.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: While there may be a small minority who do not think of those around them, the majority of people try to follow the advice to reduce the spread of covid. We know that the virus spreads where people are in close contact. This is about not just pubs and nightclubs; it includes those in overcrowded housing, those in exposed jobs where working from home is not an option, and those on zero-hours contracts who simply will not get paid if they are not working. Does the Secretary of State not think it is a bit inappropriate for politicians with well-paid and secure jobs to suggest that rising covid cases in certain areas are just due to some form of misbehaviour requiring tougher penalties?

People want to do the right thing, whether due to restrictions or because they are infected themselves, but sometimes they feel that they have no option but to continue going out of the house. Although in general surveys the vast majority of people say that they would isolate if they caught covid, a study from King's College

London shows that less than 20% of those who develop symptoms go on to isolate. That was associated with financial hardship, social deprivation, having dependent children and working in key jobs that cannot be carried out from home. Why is the Chancellor not continuing the full furlough scheme when we are heading into a second wave and the hardest winter that the NHS will ever have faced? There are still millions of people who have not received any support since March. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that, for those on low wages and in insecure work, the choice between staying at home and feeding their family just does not feel like a choice at all?

Matt Hancock: I agree with the hon. Lady that the majority of people try to follow the advice, and that the vast majority of people want to do the right thing. We introduced the £500 payment for those on low incomes precisely to support people to do that. We introduced it right across the UK, working with the Scottish Government, and there are signs that the uptake of that has allowed people to complete isolation when they need to, in order to keep others safe.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): My right hon. Friend and his Department have engaged with me and my Tees Valley colleagues a number of times in recent weeks, and I thank him for that. He is well aware of my deep reservations about further restrictions on my constituents' lives, liberties and livelihoods, particularly due to the mental health impact of these restrictions. Can he confirm that, while discussions are ongoing, there are no current plans to move Redcar and Cleveland into tier 3 restrictions? Will he also commit to working with me, Redcar and Cleveland Council, my Tees Valley colleagues and the Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, on any future changes?

Matt Hancock: Yes, we have been working very closely with the Tees Valley. The level 2 restrictions there were not something that we put into place lightly, but we followed the data. We will continue to follow the data and take the action that is needed—but only the action that is needed—and to engage with my hon. Friend and with the Mayor of Tees Valley, who is rising above party politics to do the right thing for the Tees Valley. The point that I would make to my hon. Friend, in addition to the points that he made, is that the impact on mental health is undoubtedly worse if the virus gets out of control, even though the measures that are taken are difficult ones. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has been very clear that the best thing for mental health is for us to keep the virus under control, although of course we need to mitigate the consequences that flow from the measures we sometimes have to take.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Today marks a low point in the handling of this situation. Instead of reuniting people behind their approach, the Government have imposed this decision, leaving a bitter taste. There are other decisions still to come, and other regions are watching what has happened today, including my own in the west midlands. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that, as significant economic support is withdrawn at the end of this month, any decision on whether national restrictions are required will not be taken because that is cheaper and a means of avoiding adequate support for the businesses and workers concerned, because if that is the case, the public health measures and the economic measures will be pulling in two different directions?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. The extra support that we put into areas that go into tier 3 is a reflection of the need to ensure that that support is there when action has to be taken for public health reasons in order to control the virus. I spoke to the Mayor of the West Midlands just before coming into the Chamber, and we will work closely together to ensure that we keep the virus under control in the west midlands, where, in very large part, the local leadership has worked closely together, again across party lines, to do what is right for the people of the west midlands.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Today, Jonathan Van-Tam said in answer to a question that a national lockdown right now would be inappropriate for places such as East Anglia. Does my right hon. Friend therefore disagree with the decision of the Labour party and Ipswich Labour that now is the time to close down the entire hospitality sector in somewhere like Ipswich with low levels of covid, which employs thousands of my constituents?

Matt Hancock: I agree, of course, with what Professor Jonathan Van-Tam said. He is a very fine scientist and a brilliant man. Right now, no one is looking for political differences for politics' sake. What people are looking for is for people to come together to make the right decisions in the national interest or the local interest, and to take these decisions as locally as possible to make sure that we support people as much as possible: take action where it is necessary, but make sure that we do not take action where it is not necessary.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Earlier, the Prime Minister said that he was still talking to the north-east. May I reiterate that, in the north-east, we believe that we should remain in tier 2 and are working hard to that end? What we do need is financial support for the test and trace work already being carried out effectively locally and financial support for our hospitality, leisure and retail sectors, which are taking the strain of current restrictions. Will the Secretary of State now fund the test and trace work being done so effectively locally, and urge the Chancellor to provide a financial support package for our hospitality, leisure and retail sectors within tier 2 to support our economy and local people?

Matt Hancock: We are working very closely with the local leadership in the north-east and with colleagues. It was very good to see the hon. Lady on a Zoom call recently to discuss this. It is important that we take the action if it is necessary, but there are early signs that the number of cases in the north-east is starting to flatten. In the first instance, that is happening among younger people, and I am still worried about the number of cases among the over-60s, who, of course, are the people who are most likely to end up in hospital or worse. So we will keep a very close eye on the situation, but we have no imminent plans to make a change. If the clinical advice were to change and we needed to move urgently, then, of course, we would seek to do that with the support of the local area.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): In the last four weeks, the number of covid patients admitted to intensive care units in hospitals in some parts of the country has increased sevenfold. I agree with my right hon. Friend that we must act now to control the spread of the virus,

[Sara Britcliffe]

but can he assure me that the Government are doing all that they can to keep cancer treatments, elective surgeries and other vital diagnostic services going?

Matt Hancock: I absolutely can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I had a meeting on this with the NHS only this week. The good news is that the backlog from the initial lockdown has been reduced: the number of very long waiters for cancer treatment—those waiting more than 104 days—has been reduced by 63%. We are working to keep that coming down. The best way that we can make cancer treatment available to everyone, and the best thing in terms of cancer treatment, is to keep the rate of coronavirus down. On the point about fairness, representing a Lancashire seat as she does, I think it is really important that the proposals that we are making for Greater Manchester, the subject of the statement this evening, are equivalent to those that were made for Lancashire. It is only fair that, between different geographies, we have the same levels of support, especially in neighbouring geographies such as Hyndburn and Manchester.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): I, too, am working hard with Tees Valley colleagues to keep the area out of tier 3, but my constituents in Hartlepool are confused and seething with anger. They are concerned about moving to tier 3 with all the health and economic impacts that that will bring. We are not in tier 3 yet, but if we get there what exit strategy does the Secretary of State have for ending lockdown?

Matt Hancock: I agree with the hon. Gentleman on his assessment: Hartlepool is in tier 2 at the moment and I hope that we can keep it there, but we will keep it under review. The best exit strategy for anywhere that wants to go into a lower tier is for everybody to follow the rules, respect social distancing and try to get the case rate coming down, but, of course, for the whole nation—indeed for the whole world—the best exit strategy is a combination of mass testing and a vaccine, and we are working incredibly hard to deliver both as quickly as feasibly possible. We need a long-term solution to covid as well as the short-term action that we are having to take.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): Greater Manchester has lived under harsh additional restrictions for three months. May I put it to my right hon. Friend that lockdowns themselves cost lives as well as livelihoods, and that they take a terrible toll on mental health, particularly of the young? Does he accept that it is better to do these things, if they must be done, by consent? In that regard, will he confirm that these measures will be brought to the House for approval, and that in any case they will end with the sunset after 28 days?

Matt Hancock: I agree with my hon. Friend that these things are better done by consent, and in the parts of the country where the whole local area has supported the measures, through getting the right messages out to people about their personal responsibility, we do tend to get a better response and see the case rate starting to come down. That is one of the many reasons why we worked so hard to try to get an agreement across

Greater Manchester and why I regret that we have not been able to, although, as I say, our door remains open. On the point about consent, of course these measures will be brought to the House, and they sunset after 28 days. We keep them under review, because we would not want to keep these measures in place a moment longer than they are needed.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): None of us doubts the grave threat to public health and the difficulty of dealing with it, but there is also now a widespread real threat of poverty, so whether the £60 million is on the table or off the table is immaterial; it is not what the elected representatives of Greater Manchester say they need. Do the Secretary of State and his Government appreciate that the people of Greater Manchester feel tonight that they have been abandoned by this Government, and that my constituents in Edinburgh West and people up and down the country will be wondering whether they will be abandoned next?

Matt Hancock: No. On the contrary, we are putting extra support into Greater Manchester, and we are willing to continue with the support akin to the support that we agreed with the leadership of the Liverpool city region and with Lancashire, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe), who has now gone from the Chamber, set out. The unprecedented level of support across the whole of this pandemic has been possible only because of the UK acting together and working together. I hope that we can continue to work with the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and her party to make sure that we get through this as best as we possibly can, suppressing the virus and supporting jobs and the NHS.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): More action is needed to help livelihoods and save incomes, so will the Government share and, if necessary, develop their work with the commercial and public sectors on how air-conditioning systems, ventilation systems, heating systems and air-extraction systems can be adapted or improved so that more commercial and public buildings can be kept open for proper use?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely; that is an incredibly important strand of work. It is being led by the Business Department, but I keep a close eye on it and, in fact, had an update on it this week, which I would be very happy to discuss with my right hon. Friend.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for all that he is doing. There are many underlying health conditions, including respiratory illnesses. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on respiratory health. Given that respiratory illnesses are one of the leading causes of death in the UK—that includes covid-19, of course—what reassurances can he offer me and those people who suffer from them that referrals for severe asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and other respiratory illnesses will not be forgotten but will be maintained, and that further unnecessary deaths will be avoided?

Matt Hancock: We work very hard on this point. To answer both this question and a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West

(Sir Graham Brady) that I did not did not answer, of course we take into account the overall health impacts: direct covid deaths; the impact of covid on our hospitals, which means it is sometimes harder to treat other illnesses, although that is now much better than it was in the first wave and the NHS is very much open; and the impact of measures on other conditions. The best way through this from a health point of view, taking all these things into account, is undoubtedly to keep the virus down, but also to try to ensure that the NHS, right across all four nations of the UK, is open for all other conditions and that if someone is asked to go to hospital then it is the safest place for them to go.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I understand that talks are ongoing about South Yorkshire, which includes Rother Valley, going into a stricter lockdown. Before any decision is made, will my right hon. Friend agree to get agreement between councils and local MPs, so that local views, concerns and support can be agreed in advance, especially around mental health and local businesses?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I am happy to agree with my hon. Friend. We were discussing on Sunday morning the challenges in South Yorkshire, where cases are going up fast and action needs to be taken. Talks are ongoing in a highly collegiate and constructive way. I pay tribute to the way that he stands up for his constituents in Rother Valley and makes the case directly to Ministers day after day about what is best for the area and represents them so clearly.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: In lockdown, people need the financial support to do the right thing and stay at home to stop the virus. In Wales, where we are in national lockdown, the Labour Government have provided £300 million. That is £100 per person to help them stay at home to beat the virus. But in Manchester, the Prime Minister has provided £22 million. That is £8 per person, instead of £100 per person in Wales. How can that be right? Will the Secretary of State and the Chancellor ensure that, wherever people live across the United Kingdom, they have enough money to stay at home to beat the virus, without inflicting massive poverty?

Matt Hancock: We have put substantial funding into not only Greater Manchester but Wales, which goes directly to businesses that are affected and have to close and directly to individuals, through the furlough scheme, the job support scheme and universal credit, which is available to all those who lose their jobs and people in low-paid work. In addition to the funding that remains on the table—and I urge the local leadership in Greater Manchester to come back to the table—there is widespread support available.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Warrington finds itself as a tier 2 island in the north-west, parked between Manchester and Liverpool. Our infection rate remains stubbornly high, though, and admissions to Warrington Hospital have now exceeded the peak of the first wave in April. Does my right hon. Friend agree that any further measures for Warrington should protect the NHS and save lives but also support local livelihoods and the economy?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I absolutely agree with the approach that my hon. Friend sets out. I am worried about the number of cases in Warrington and about the impact on Warrington Hospital, which is an excellent hospital. Of course, Warrington is not an island, because Cheshire as a whole has seen case rates rise. It is an area that we are worried about, and we are working with local leadership to ensure that we take appropriate measures and put in place the support needed.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: It is impossible to describe today's events without using unparliamentary language, but out of deference to you, Mr Speaker, I will settle for "a complete shambles". Today, this Government made a choice not to protect the poorest people in Greater Manchester through the punishing reality of the winter to come. Does the Secretary of State really believe that we will get through this pandemic by subjecting communities to punishing financial negotiations? Do the Government truly value pennies more than lives? The Government are playing poker with people's jobs, homes and lives. Is the Secretary of State proud to be a member of this Government?

Matt Hancock: Contrary to the way that the hon. Gentleman described it, the Government have put forward the same proposals in Greater Manchester that were agreed in Lancashire and in Liverpool. Unfortunately, the Mayor of Greater Manchester walked away from the table, but the offer is there. I urge all local leaders, including the hon. Gentleman, to take forward that offer to resolve this and for us all to work together for the benefit of the people of Manchester.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): My right hon. Friend told the House that these measures are about the increase in infection among the over-60s, who are more vulnerable to this dreadful disease. What assessment has he made of whether that infection is being spread in the community, as opposed to care settings? If it is in the community, what messages should we give to the rest of the community about the need to make sure that they protect their loved ones?

Matt Hancock: I think there is a duty for all of us to send messages to the communities that we serve that people need to take personal responsibility to try to reduce the spread of the virus. There have recently been some cases in care homes, but far fewer, and it seems that the actions that we have taken and the very hard work of the care home sector over the summer—the staff who work in care homes—has reduced transmission. In most care homes there are more staff than residents, and they live in the community, so it is almost impossible to stop any infection getting into all care homes when the level of infection in the community rises. Having said that, the core of this second peak is in the community, where every single one of us can act to take more responsibility to help to slow the spread of the virus.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My constituents, like everyone else's, have suffered huge anxiety over the past six months, worrying about their health and livelihoods. The chaos that has unfolded today in relation to Greater Manchester will have done nothing to allay their fears. They are also angry about the money that has been squandered on personal protective equipment purchases,

[Kerry McCarthy]

on consultants, and on the failing Test and Trace system, which my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State raised with the Secretary of State. The right hon. Gentleman did not answer my hon. Friend's questions then—would he answer them now? Why is Manchester not entitled to the money it needs to get by in this crisis, when so much money has been wasted elsewhere?

Matt Hancock: The money that we are proposing, and put on the table for Greater Manchester, is exactly the same as the amount that was agreed with the leadership of Liverpool and of Lancashire. There is support there to help people through what are—the hon. Lady is quite right—very difficult times. I hope that we can resolve this, but we needed to act after 10 days, with infections still going up. It was our duty to act, even though we could not yet get the agreement of the local leaders, but I hope that that will come.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP) [V]: One of the ways in which we can hope to pick a path out of this crisis is with improved and faster testing. The Health and Social Care Secretary and the Prime Minister have spoken in past days about new testing technologies being piloted with NHS staff. If that technology is found to be effective, what is the right hon. Gentleman's timeline for rolling that testing out to wider groups, and will those tests contribute to the half a million daily tests that the Government say will be conducted by the end of the month?

Matt Hancock: The answer is yes and yes. They will be there to benefit everyone across the whole United Kingdom.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I was hugely disappointed that the Mayor of Greater Manchester failed to reach an agreement with the Government, thus compounding the uncertainty facing my Cheadle constituents. We need to find a way forward. My right hon. Friend will know that I have consistently advocated on behalf of Stockport Council and for my constituents in Cheadle, referring to testing and tracing and covid compliance in the hospitality sector, and I have pressed for a borough-by-borough approach that reflects our lower case rate. Tonight, I have written to the leader of Stockport Council, urging her to act on behalf of my Cheadle constituents and work with the Government to negotiate a local authority-specific financial package that supports and protects Cheadle residents and businesses. As we consider the next steps, will the Minister continue to work with our local leaders and me to secure a fair deal for our area?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend puts the case very clearly, and she is right. We do not want businesses in Stockport to be disadvantaged, so an offer, proportionate to the support that we have put into Liverpool and Lancashire, is on the table. I will take away her proposal and talk to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who is engaged in those talks right now, about her suggestion of a borough-by-borough approach. We remain open to a GM-wide approach, but so far we have not been able to get the agreement of the Mayor for the support that is on the table for the businesses of Greater Manchester.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement that he has no plans to move the north-east into tier 3. He is right that in County Durham covid numbers are plateauing, especially if students are taken out. Will he, though, address the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist)? When will he give the extra resources to local directors of public health to do local test and tracing? When will local directors of public health get timely information from national Test and Trace, so that they can chase up those cases? At the moment they are getting the information up to 48 hours after the case—

Matt Hancock *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State should let Members finish before he stands.

Matt Hancock: The questions were so good, Mr Speaker, that I was enthusiastic to answer them as quickly as possible. I am a fan of fast turnaround times, and hope I can ensure that the data gets turned around even more quickly in County Durham. When it comes to the case rate, yes, there have been good signs, but I am still worried about the case rate among the over-60s, and the discussions with local leaders continue. I absolutely take the right hon. Gentleman's points on board, though.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): In view of the fact that the Secretary of State is in favour of fast turnaround times, may I ask him this? Given that Lancashire and now Manchester in tier 3 will be able to keep their gyms open, will he either use the Government's powers, or give powers to local council leaders in Halton and Merseyside, to reopen gyms in that area?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman makes an argument that my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore) has consistently made. Why do we not have a conversation about it and see whether we can make any progress?

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): We know that infection rates are at different levels throughout the country, and that restrictions cause issues for people who suffer from health conditions other than covid and have a huge impact on the economy, but closing pubs in Harrogate or Newquay will not make case levels fall in Manchester or Newcastle, so does my right hon. Friend agree that a blanket national lockdown is wrong and that local interventions are what we need now to tackle this crisis?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I wholeheartedly agree. The localised and regional approach is increasingly being taken up around the world—for instance, in France. Indeed, Sweden, which has often been discussed in this House, has put in place a system very similar to ours for exactly the sorts of reasons that my hon. Friend has set out.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): As the Secretary of State will know from the Zoom call we had on Sunday morning, for which I thank him, the Mayor and leaders of the Sheffield city region are engaged with Ministers and officials on a number of asks in order that a move to tier 3 could be considered. Those asks are about extra help for businesses that are not completely shut but have a substantial reduction in income, and

more help beyond the £500 scheme for people who are asked to isolate. The Secretary of State can correct me if I am wrong, but it seems from his answers to previous questions that he is saying that the offer made so far to Lancashire and Merseyside is the final offer that anyone else could expect to receive, and that no one else will get any more, particularly in revenue or resources, than has been offered to those areas. Is that true or not?

Matt Hancock: That is an overinterpretation of my comments. The discussions with the local leadership in South Yorkshire have been very constructive, very positive and all focused on the public health need to get this virus under control in South Yorkshire, and then the support that needs to go alongside that. They are being led by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and I would not want to fetter the privacy in which those discussions have rightly taken place. We should leave it to the local leaders and my right hon. Friend to try to come to a conclusion.

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State is as disappointed as I am that the Greater Manchester Mayor has been unable to reach agreement with the Government today. Will he and other right hon. colleagues now commit to meet me, other Greater Manchester colleagues and council leaders in Greater Manchester to find a fair and workable agreement?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. Support proportionate to the support made available to Lancashire is on the table. We are willing to meet anybody from Greater Manchester to help make this happen, and it is best done as a team effort. The offer was there on the table. I, like my hon. Friend, regret that it was not taken forward. However, I hope that council leaders in Wigan, colleagues from across the House and, if he wants, the Mayor will come back to the table and work together for the people of Greater Manchester.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Health Secretary's attempt to divide and rule the Mayor and the Members of Parliament in Manchester is absolutely transparent. It is shameful that some of those Conservative colleagues, who have been working collectively, should collapse like they appear to be doing today. Does it not say everything about this Government that they should believe £7,000 a day is an adequate amount to pay consultants to work on his failing track and trace programme, but £8 per head is more than enough for people in Manchester and right across the north and the midlands to go into this tier 3 after the tier 2 programme has not worked?

Matt Hancock: On the contrary, we are working hard across party lines and trying to rise above that sort of political attack to work for the benefit and the public interests of everybody in this country.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): In Gedling, which does not have a large student population, there continues to be a worryingly high number of coronavirus cases. It is concerning to hear that the general picture appears to be moving upwards in the population, particularly among the over-60s, where we know the risks are higher. Does

my right hon. Friend agree that this demonstrates the importance of acting fast, with targeted action if it is available, to help save lives?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I strongly agree. I praise my hon. Friend's leadership in his local community in making this case. The number of cases in Nottingham and increasingly across Nottinghamshire is worrying. Nottinghamshire went into level 2 last week, and talks are ongoing about what more might be needed. I praise the people of Nottinghamshire for what they are doing to try to slow the spread of this virus. It may be that more needs to be done, and we will be driven entirely by the data, working closely with the local authorities.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Cheshire leaders and, indeed, the Warrington leader have met the Department and written to the Prime Minister asking for local resources for the local test, trace and isolate system, as well as a substantial financial package of £42 million to support our hospitality sector—people have mirrored that point across the Chamber—but they have yet to receive a reply. Given the urgency of the situation, please will the Secretary of State do his utmost to make sure that that reply goes to the leaders? Finally, as a Mancunian by birth, I find the spitefulness from the Prime Minister disgraceful. The Prime Minister should do the right thing by the people of Greater Manchester.

Matt Hancock: The Prime Minister is seeking precisely to do that and he, like me, very much hopes that the local leadership in Greater Manchester will do their bit. When it comes to Cheshire and indeed Warrington, which we talked about earlier, I am worried about the cases. I will make sure that the engagement that the hon. Gentleman and his councils seek happens as soon as possible.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: Can I commend the Secretary of State for his localised approach, and for the calm way in which he is dealing with some unwarranted attacks on both him and the Prime Minister?

The Epilepsy Society is based in Chalfont St Peter in my constituency. It provides specialist care to a number of vulnerable residents and has, according to one relative, worked wonders in keeping residents safe and secure. However, visits from relatives cannot take place as the incidence of covid-19 grows, and the home is now locked down again. With 60-minute tests now available down the road at Heathrow airport, could we not arrange for this type of testing for close relatives so they could visit their loved ones? It would make all the difference in the world to my constituents and many others in long-term care.

Matt Hancock: The answer is yes. We absolutely want to use this sort of testing as it becomes more widely available to do exactly the sort of thing that my right hon. Friend sets out.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: May I say how shocked I am at some of the responses from the Health Secretary? All Andy Burnham and the leaders of the Greater Manchester local authorities have been trying to do is to ensure that their constituents—

[Debbie Abrahams]

our constituents—are not plunged into poverty, homelessness and worse. That is all they have been trying to do. To describe it in the way that he has is really upsetting.

International evidence shows that key requirements for local lockdowns to work are, first, to have a competent test, trace and isolate system; secondly, that businesses and workers are supported by a financial package equivalent to existing incomes; and, finally, that national Government support local leaders. The Government have failed to deliver any of those. Are they following the evidence or not?

Matt Hancock: We are working incredibly hard to support the action that is needed to suppress this virus, while protecting the NHS and schools and supporting the economy as much as is possible. When it comes to the work in Greater Manchester, that is absolutely our goal. That is the work that we are doing and, given that support proportionate to that already agreed in Lancashire and Liverpool is on the table, I hope that local leaders will work with us.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What estimate has the Secretary of State made of the number of excess deaths above the long-term average in each of the last few weeks?

Matt Hancock: We have, thankfully, seen that the number of excess deaths is around the level of the long-term average. I want to keep it that way and that is why we are taking the action that we are, so that this does not get out of hand like we saw in the first peak.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): There is a pattern here, is there not? Whenever the Government cannot agree a deal, it is always somebody else's fault. In this case, it is Andy Burnham's fault for simply standing up for what Greater Manchester needs—not what we want; what we need. Maybe I am also overinterpreting the Secretary of State's comments, but in his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), he suggested that there might be different offers for different areas. Greater Manchester was asking for a carefully costed package to meet our needs and our requirements. Why can the Government not give Greater Manchester what we need?

Matt Hancock: The offer that was made to Greater Manchester was proportionate to the support that we have already given to and agreed with the local leadership in Liverpool and Lancashire, and I regret that the Mayor rejected it. We want to support businesses across Greater Manchester, so we are open to further discussions about business support with local leaders, including the council leaders, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) suggested, and I hope that we can make some progress.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: Andy Burnham has said that, on covid-19, we need to

“carry people with us, not crush their spirit.”

Does the Home Secretary think that he has carried the people of the north with the Government as they watch bully boy tactics and punishment beatings being used

against the legitimate concerns of local leaders from all parties to try to protect the livelihoods of the poorest people and local businesses in Greater Manchester? How does that bode for other areas such as the Humber, which may well need more help as they move into higher tiers?

Matt Hancock: In areas that we are already in discussions with, such as South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, the north-east and Nottinghamshire, right across the board those discussions are constructive, positive and focused entirely on the wellbeing of people locally. I hope that in Hull cases stay relatively low and we do not have to go into a higher tier. There are no plans to do so at the moment, and I urge the people of Hull to keep following the rules and keep the coronavirus down in Hull. What I would say is that in every other part of the country, we have had highly constructive talks that have not involved this sort of party political point scoring. I urge that approach from everybody.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): In my constituency, the latest figures show an infection rate of just 54 per 100,000—about half the national average and one tenth of the rate in Liverpool—so I think it is absolutely right that the Government are not following a national lockdown but are instead following a regional, local approach. In those areas that do need to go to tier 3, it is absolutely right that the Government give additional financial support, but it is also right, surely, that the Government treat them fairly and equally. The Government could not give greater support to one area, Greater Manchester, than to Liverpool or Lancashire, because then the local leaders who are refusing to take the action necessary to lock down the virus will be given greater financial rewards than the leaders who are taking the steps necessary.

Matt Hancock: This point about fairness is really important. Imagine how it would feel to be running a business or to be somebody who lives in Liverpool when there has been an agreement across party lines for the support that comes with the measures that are necessary, and then, after a very public disagreement, instead of the constructive work that we really hope to achieve, the result was a deal that was not proportionate and fair. Fairness is absolutely at the heart of what we are trying to achieve. That is why it is right that we have the extra offer of support that continues to be on the table. We want to strike a fair deal, but we have to take these measures to keep people safe.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): In his statement, the Secretary of State said to the people of Manchester, “We will be by your side”, and that his response requires all of us to make a sacrifice. I put it to him that that is not entirely true, because it is constituencies like mine that are making the real, tough sacrifices in facing restrictions for nearly three months because of his and his Government's failings. Just so we are aware, will this Government try to play poker with the people of Bradford and their financial support, like they did with Manchester before putting it into the highest tier?

Matt Hancock: We work very closely with the council in Bradford. Of course I am very happy to talk to the hon. Lady about what might be necessary. It has been very difficult for Bradford these past few months:

I absolutely appreciate that. Bradford—certainly the city of Bradford, which she represents—has been in measures for a long time and has had extra restrictions. I hope that we can bring the number of cases down so that we can release some of those restrictions, and that is best done by working together.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I welcome the setting up of a second local national testing centre locally in Fenton Manor in my constituency. I thank the city council and health professionals for the work that they have been doing locally. Will my right hon Friend continue to support this excellent work and continue to grow the testing capacity?

Matt Hancock: Yes, 100%. My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The extra testing capacity that we are seeing across the country does not happen by magic; it happens by the hard work of his constituents and others who are playing their part in the testing regime.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State talks about fairness, but today we find out that Greater Manchester is effectively getting a third of the level of financial support that the Government gave to Lancashire. It is a failure that his Government cannot negotiate a decent package of support with our Greater Manchester Mayor. Andy Burnham has argued for that decent financial support for people who work in businesses that are going to be closed down by Government restrictions, and for resources for locally led test and trace. He was right to do that. I urge the Secretary of State to think again. This is too important a time in this pandemic to fail to work with the devolved local government system that his Government created.

Matt Hancock: I think it is time to put aside short-term political point scoring. The deal on the table that the Mayor of Greater Manchester walked away from was a fair deal that had been agreed, proportionate to the deal that had been agreed with leaders in Liverpool and in Lancashire. I know I keep repeating this point, but it is absolutely at the centre of what it is to be fair, which is about treating people in similar situations in a similar way. I think that the British people understand that. Hence we enter into these local discussions in good faith, and everywhere else they have been engaged with in good faith. I hope that is the way that they can continue in Greater Manchester in future.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I want to be fair to my right hon. Friend, who is motivated at all times by the best of intentions, but I gently say that those of us who have a contrary view to all of the Government's policies are not in immediate tow with the Mayor of Greater Manchester, nor are we in tow with the Labour Opposition. I feel a deep sense of disappointment at this collective failure that we have seen today and, quite frankly, my constituents in Hazel Grove deserve better. I shall resist the urge to lose my temper—tempting though it may be—because these exchanges deserve a greater elevation of tone, but I say this: the definition of insanity is to continue to do the same thing over and over again in the hope that it will turn good. We have had three months of interventions in Greater Manchester, which have yielded very little results indeed. I cannot help but fear that the medicine is worse than the disease.

Matt Hancock: We are starting to see some of the local action that we have already taken just starting, potentially, to work, and we have seen in Bolton that the cases were shooting up before we took action and then levelled off. So there is evidence of this approach working, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend to make sure that we can get out of these measures, which I appreciate he is unenthusiastic about, as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: We are heading to Manchester for our final question, from Lucy Powell.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Thank you for squeezing me in, Mr Speaker. Can I say that it was not just the Mayor, but all the leaders and most of the MPs across Greater Manchester? We are a city united this evening, but should not any economic support package be based on need, not on some unpublished, arbitrary formula that no one has any idea what it consists of? If it was based on need, it would take account of the fact that business density and the economy of Greater Manchester is bigger than in other areas and that we have many more low-paid workers—that is something that the Secretary of State should know if he is talking about fairness—so businesses in Manchester will actually receive a lot less than businesses elsewhere. Can I tell him tonight that his Government have really misjudged the mood up here, and any less than is needed coming immediately to Greater Manchester for these new restrictions would rightly be seen as spiteful and political and nothing whatsoever to do with public health?

Matt Hancock: I think it benefits all of us to rise above the politics and try to work together. As I say, the offer that was made remains on the table and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady, who I know—as my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) said—works with the best of intentions, and I hope that we can work together to try to tackle this dreadful disease.

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

Mr Speaker: Would those who wish to leave the Chamber please do so before I start the next motions?

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

INSOLVENCY

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Extension of the Relevant Period) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1031), dated 23 September 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 24 September, be approved.—*(Eddie Hughes.)*

The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 21 October (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

PUBLIC HEALTH

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Self-Isolation) (England) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1045), dated 27 September 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 28 September, be approved.—(*Eddie Hughes.*)

The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 21 October (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

PUBLIC HEALTH

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (North of England, North East and North West of England and Obligations of Undertakings (England) etc.) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1057), dated 30 September 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 30 September, be approved.—(*Eddie Hughes.*)

The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 21 October (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY

That the draft Community Infrastructure Levy (Amendment) (England) (No. 2) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 28 September, be approved.—(*Eddie Hughes.*)

The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 21 October (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

GENERAL SYNOD (REMOTE MEETINGS) (TEMPORARY STANDING ORDERS) MEASURE

That the General Synod (Remote Meetings) (Temporary Standing Orders) Measure (HC 879), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for her Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.—(*Andrew Selous.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Closure of Partick branch of TSB bank in Glasgow

8.9 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Since 2015, at least once every year to 18 months, a bank has closed in Glasgow North. Although the closure in today's petition is just over the boundary in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), it serves a wide area across Partick, the west end and beyond. Its closure is another nail in the coffin of high streets and community shopping and services. It is another example of banks making claims about footfall and usage that simply do not seem to match the experience of anyone who visits or uses the branch. Banks of all brands must do better. We need imagination and commitment to communities so that the most disadvantaged are not further penalised by lack of access to basic services.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow North,

Declares that proposed closure of the Partick branch of the TSB bank in Glasgow will have a detrimental effect on local communities and the local economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges her Majesty's Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and TSB Bank to take in account the concerns of petitioners and take whatever steps they can to halt the planned closure of this branch.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002612]

Closure of Anniesland, Drumchapel and Partick branches of TSB bank in Glasgow

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The closure of three TSB branches in my constituency will be devastating for local constituents and for businesses. Both Partick and Anniesland serve vast areas, but owing to good public transport links, they can be accessed by those whose local branches have already closed. In Drumchapel, an area with high digital exclusion and poor transport connectivity, the TSB is the only bank for miles around and there are regularly queues out the door.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons

The petition of residents of Glasgow North West,

Declares that proposed closure of the Anniesland, Drumchapel and Partick branches of the TSB bank in Glasgow will have a detrimental effect on local communities and the local economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges her Majesty's Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and TSB Bank to take in account the concerns of petitioners and take whatever steps they can to halt the planned closure of this branch.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002613]

Universal Credit uplift

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I rise on behalf of, unfortunately, too many of my constituents who rely on universal credit. It is a fact that Tory welfare policies are plunging people into poverty. Child poverty is a scourge on society. Hungry children find it harder to learn. The reality is that their life chances are disadvantaged from the outset.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government have mitigated the worst effects of poverty and we have the lowest child poverty rates in the UK, but more is needed from the UK Government. The £20 universal credit top-up has been a lifeline for some during covid-19.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to immediately bring forward additional measures to permanently increase Universal Credit in response to the long-term impact of Covid-19.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the residents of the constituency of Kilmarnock and Loudoun,

Declares that the economic consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic has led to many more people facing increased levels of poverty and financial hardship; further declares that the Government provided welcome support at the beginning of the pandemic when it topped up Universal Credit payments by £20 per week; further declares that it is regretful that the Government has decided not to make permanent this increase to Universal Credit payments.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to immediately bring forward additional measures to permanently increase Universal Credit in response to the long-term impact of Covid-19.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002614]

Remote Education: Self-isolating Pupils

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

8.13 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): In just 36 hours, schools will be legally required to provide online lessons to all pupils self-isolating because of coronavirus. In theory, that is a sensible suggestion to ensure that no parent has to choose between the health and education of their child, but in practice, and in the shadow of the digital divide, it is the latest of the Department for Education's ill-thought-through pandemic proposals that have pushed the patience of our hard-working teachers to its limit.

I will reveal the horrifying extent of the digital divide across our country, consider the practical constraints that need to be urgently overcome for teachers to provide online learning, and offer a solution to the Minister following the Government's woefully inadequate approach in advance of the new requirements. I will begin with lockdown, however.

My journey into the digital divide started in March, following a conversation with Debbie, an amazing health visitor in my constituency who had just visited temporary accommodation for 86 homeless families. Lockdown presented challenges for all of us, but spare a thought for those families in cramped rooms with no outside space and, as Debbie pointed out, no internet connection.

It is indisputable how vital the internet has been for us all in this time, unlocking the chance to remain in contact with loved ones, to take part in online exercise classes and to work and learn from home, despite the closure of offices and schools, but that lifeline was not available to all. The lockdown exposed the digital divide across the UK, with 11% of the population without home internet access and an estimated 9% of children without access to a laptop, desktop or tablet. Ofcom estimates that the number affected could be as many as an extraordinary 1.78 million children in the UK.

While the Government promoted their investment in the online Oak National Academy, let us be clear that no number of online lessons could benefit those children who were unable to login from home. That was not the fault of their schools. The pandemic presented the most testing environment for teaching. I have lost count of the extraordinary examples of teachers going above and beyond for their pupils. Their dedication should be celebrated and shouted from the rooftops. Some schools, such as the outstanding Ursuline High School attended by many of my constituents, showed that they were already at the forefront of technology; every pupil was given a tablet and received six lessons a day from home. If the pupils were not logged in by 9 am, the school was on to the parents right away.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this debate forward. Education, as she has just said, is so important. I am very pleased to see the Minister in his place, and we will be looking for an exceptional response from him. Does she not agree that, especially with children facing exams after losing months this year, it is vital that they have access to learning at home if put into isolation? Every hour of teaching is necessary and, further, it is imperative that the Government make additional resources available to help staff teach remotely as needed.

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree with the hon. Member. I am not sure whether he is aware that a quarter of children on free school meals did less than one hour's schoolwork a day during lockdown. Staggering data from the Children's Commissioner indicates that more than 58% of primary and just under half of secondary school pupils were being provided with no online lessons whatever. There can be no doubt: those children who could not access the same resources as their classmates will have returned to school even further behind. It is fundamental that they catch up.

Those of us who recognise the problem did not idly stand by. While the Government struggled to source and distribute data and devices, extraordinary charitable efforts in so many of our constituencies secured laptops, tablets and sim cards to ensure that children had the chance to stay connected. I am personally grateful to Lycamobile, eBay, Three, Craig Russell and all at Tesco Mobile, my local Ahmadiyya Muslim community and the simply brilliant Dons local action group for their extraordinary generosity in providing data and hundreds of devices to children in my constituency. I commend the impressive pledges made by BT and Three to keep many of the most vulnerable families connected. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) is particularly grateful to an extraordinary councillor in his borough—Councillor Beverley Momenabadi—for her tireless work in securing devices for her residents.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her amazing work on this most crucial of issues and join her in praising the excellent work of Councillor Beverley Momenabadi, who is the innovation digital champion for Wolverhampton. Her survey of pupils and schools has shown that at five primary schools in the city, over half of pupils had no access to a wi-fi connection at home, and pupils at many other schools lacked a suitable device with which to study online. With some 400,000 pupils being sent home because of covid cases being identified in their school, does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential to ensure that children have access to a wi-fi connection, as well as the laptops and other hardware they need, to stop this situation exacerbating the educational inequality that already exists?

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend.

I thank all those charitable efforts during lockdown, but it cannot be right that educational opportunity for our children during lockdown was dependent on a lottery of charitable giving. This is not just an issue of access; it is an issue of deprivation, and it should be right at the top of the Government's levelling-up agenda.

Data from the Office for National Statistics reveals that only 51% of households earning between £6,000 and £10,000 have internet access, compared with 99% of households earning over £40,000, and while 30.7% of private school pupils attended four or more online lessons a day, only 6.3% of state school pupils did the same. However damning the statistics sound, we should not be misled. Being connected is one thing, but more than 880,000 children live in households with only one mobile internet connection. I do not know about you, Mr Speaker, but mum's mobile does not strike me as an acceptable solution to logging in and learning from home. No

wonder the Oak Academy data shows that pupils were accessing lessons through games consoles, mobile phones and old tablets. For those families using pay-as-you-go, streaming online lessons costs an astronomical £37 a day—another ill thought-through policy hitting the poorest hardest.

No one should underestimate the digitally connected world that we now live in and assume that we face a short-term problem. Secondary school pupils spend an average of one hour and 37 minutes a week on schoolwork through the internet, with every click widening the digital divide in our society. Before lockdown, children on free school meals were leaving school 18 months behind their classmates, and the gap was getting worse. The digital divide will manifest itself by giving those from the wealthiest backgrounds an advantage over the other children. We cannot let coronavirus make our society even more unequal and unfair. Whatever happened to levelling up? This is not just a manifesto commitment: in just 36 hours, the digital divide will change from a political debate to a legal requirement, with schools obliged to provide online lessons to the increasing numbers of children who are self-isolating at home.

I anticipate that the Minister will celebrate from the Dispatch Box the small number of devices already distributed by the Government, but however I look at it, the numbers simply do not add up. There were 540,000 children eligible under the Government's initial scheme to provide devices to disadvantaged learners, but only 200,000 devices and 50,000 routers to give away. The whole system was chaotic and ad hoc, with some children receiving devices regardless of whether they already had one, and others not arriving until July, too late for term time and months into the world of remote education. Staggeringly, even now—seven months after schools closed—the Government's support package for remote education still has a large section entitled "Remote education support: available soon".

Teachers are sick and tired of information leaks before midnight, document updates and vague press releases. The message being conveyed to schools is that they are accountable from Thursday, and will face consequences if remote education is not in place. But how can the Department expect schools to be ready to provide remote education if it is not ready itself? More devices have finally been pledged, but the numbers still fall far short of the need. Where is the drive or the ambition? The headteacher of an Ofsted-rated "outstanding" school in my constituency says:

"Today in school the leadership team have been trying to work out exactly how to address the legislative changes, when around one third of pupils do not have devices. Frankly, we do not know what to do."

Importantly, the Government do not seem to recognise that a device is only as effective as the internet connection that it is used with. No matter how expensive, how smart and how modern the device is, it is rendered useless if it comes without the data or dongle needed to link in from home. Why has the Department not engaged with all the mobile virtual network operators? After all, the families on the lowest incomes are unlikely to have contracts with the bigger providers.

Meanwhile, the Alliance for Inclusive Education notes that there is nothing in the guidance about the provision of adaptive and assistive technologies, but with the clock ticking, four of my local schools contacted me

urgently this morning. The first has 79 pupils unable to access remote learning online. The second has 60 students who still need access to their own devices, and that does not take into account those who share devices with siblings. The third has an extraordinary 31% of key stage 2 pupils with just a mobile connection or no internet at all. The fourth has had a coronavirus outbreak, but laptops ordered from the Department for Education have no timeframe for delivery, and 15% of children are yet to log in from home. Please will the Minister tell me when St Thomas of Canterbury Catholic Primary School will get its 47 devices? Although the Government point to the covid fund provided to support schools, from which emergency devices can be purchased, there is no spare change once cleaning supplies, new desks, sinks, chairs, fencing, signage, red tape, face masks, thermometers, aprons, gloves and more have all been purchased. So whose responsibility is it to ensure that these children have the data and devices required?

Teachers need to know that tonight, because many of them are understandably at the end of their tether. One said:

“What was the Department for Education’s biggest failure during lockdown? Not providing schools with the resources or funding to ensure every child who did not have access to the internet or suitable devices for remote learning would receive one. With the best will in the world, this was a short turnaround. We all understand that it could not be achieved overnight, but it is worth noting that schools were expected to move mountains overnight—the Department required them to do so.”

Another teacher told me that she is already working through her breaks and bringing masses of work home. She asked whether the Minister could clarify how she is expected to mark home learning, how she can give constructive feedback to isolated pupils and when in a school day she is to provide the full day of extra lessons. The language by a third teacher was a bit less parliamentary; “When on earth in our working hours are we doing this?” is perhaps a translation. We must not underestimate the practical difficulties facing a school. How does a teacher simultaneously teach half their class in person and half online? How can younger primary pupils be expected to sit attentively in front of a screen throughout a whole day? Are the arts, music or drama subjects to be sacrificed in the online world? Add in a crashed computer or broken microphone and the barriers facing classrooms are clear.

Furthermore, nobody should underestimate the importance of child protection issues. Teachers have told me horror stories this week of children taking the iPad to the toilet and of a mum swearing in front of a class of horrified primary students. I wholeheartedly appreciate the importance of ensuring that no child falls even further behind in their education, and I am confident that the practical difficulties outlined can be overcome, but the Government cannot just pin the obligation on schools without giving them every ounce of support and guidance that they need.

Given the statistics I shared this evening, we can be in no doubt that without urgent support the online lesson requirement will fail those children on the wrong side of the digital divide, but the Government knew this was coming and they were too slow to act. Back in June, I shared a cross-party warning directly with the Secretary of State, calling for all children entitled to free school meals to have internet access and an adequate device at home. That was not just my view, but that of four

former Education Secretaries; four former children’s Ministers; the former head of Ofsted; the Labour shadow Education Secretary; the Conservative Chair of the Education Committee; the Liberal Democrat education spokesman; and the chairs of the all-party group on children, the all-party group on education, the all-party group on social mobility and the all-party group on digital skills; a number of children’s charities, unions, think-tanks, MPs and academics; and even my favourite former Prime Minister. I am now looking to ensure the backing of a wonderful young Premier League striker from Manchester—because digital exclusion is not an issue that directly resulted from the pandemic, and neither will it subside with it.

The importance of closing the digital divide extends far beyond the classroom. Coronavirus has shone a light on this inequality, highlighting the critical role that adequate access to safe, high-quality online learning resources at home plays in children’s lives. Unless schools are supported with the means to adhere to this new legal requirement, these educational inequalities will only be exacerbated. That simply cannot be right, because surely no matter what corner of the Chamber we sit in, we can all agree that no child’s education should be dependent on their internet connection.

8.30 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing the debate. Ensuring that children continue to receive their education during the pandemic is critical, to ensure that this generation of schoolchildren reach their potential and to prevent a widening of the attainment gap; I share her objective.

It is thanks to the outstanding efforts of our teachers and staff that pupils continue to receive the education and opportunities they deserve in the face of the pandemic. We recognise that all children and young people have had their education disrupted as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. The Department is committed to the continuation of high-quality education for all pupils during this period. We know that schools and colleges worked extremely hard over the summer to prepare for a full reopening and to develop remote education contingency plans. That is testament to their commitment to ensuring that any missed education is recovered and that we prevent the attainment gap from widening further. We have a shared responsibility to ensure that this generation of young people do not face long-term disadvantage.

The Government were clear that pupils in all year groups and from all types of school should return to school full time from the beginning of the autumn term. Figures show that, as of 15 October, 99.7% of schools were open and over 7 million children and young people are back in school, representing 89% of pupils across the country. We continue to do everything in our power to ensure that every child can continue to attend school safely, because that is the best place for them to be for their education, development and wellbeing.

The Department works closely with public health bodies to monitor the rate of transmission of the virus. On 15 October, approximately 0.1% of pupils in state schools were self-isolating because they had tested positive for the coronavirus, 0.5% were self-isolating with a suspected case of coronavirus, and between 3.9% and 4.3% of pupils were self-isolating because they had been in contact with a potential case.

[Nick Gibb]

We recognise that for some pupils, remote education may need to be an essential component alongside classroom teaching. In those circumstances, the Government want to ensure that there is no doubt about the roles and responsibilities within the system for providing that remote education. That is why the Secretary of State issued a temporary continuity direction on 1 October, to give clarity that schools have a duty to provide remote education for state-funded school-aged children who are unable to attend school due to the coronavirus pandemic, in line with guidance and the law. That links to the remote education expectations that the Department published for schools on 2 July. The direction says that schools must have regard to the guidance, which has been available to schools since 2 July. It sets out clearly the expectations that we have for the quality and breadth of remote education.

Ensuring that schools can provide a high quality of remote education was and continues to be a key part of our work to support schools. Alongside the direction, the Department announced further remote education support intended to help schools and colleges in meeting the remote education expectations. The support package is available over the coming months, and parts of it are available now to support schools and colleges seeking additional support. Information can be found on the “Get help with remote education” page on the gov.uk website.

We have invested over £160 million to support remote education. As part of that, during the summer term, we delivered over 220,000 laptops and tablets for disadvantaged children who would not otherwise have access to the internet. It was one of the largest procurements of computers in the UK. On one single day, 27,000 were being delivered. We are now supplementing that support by making available 250,000 additional laptops and tablets for disadvantaged children in years 3 to 11 in the event that face-to-face schooling is disrupted this term as a result of the pandemic. By the end of this week, we will have delivered, since the beginning of term, 100,000 of those 250,000 computers to schools.

The hon. Member referred to St Thomas of Canterbury primary school, and she sent me a letter today. I checked the status of the school’s order with my officials as a consequence of the hon. Member sending me that letter. According to my officials, St Thomas of Canterbury primary school’s order of 47 laptops was received on Friday 16 October and we expect that the laptops will be dispatched to them tomorrow. The hon. Member has achieved some piece of information by orchestrating this debate this evening.

We are also working with the major telecoms companies to improve internet connectivity for disadvantaged and vulnerable families. The Department is piloting an approach where, for families who rely on a mobile internet connection, mobile network operators will provide temporary access to free additional data, offering them more flexibility to access the resources that they need the most.

Siobhain McDonagh: I am becoming increasingly aware of the fact that being poor means that people pay their bills differently, whether it is electricity meters or gas meters. They get their data from pay-as-you-go mobiles from providers other than the mainstream ones, such as giffgaff and Lycamobile. What is the Minister doing in those sorts of areas?

Nick Gibb: With permission, I will write to the hon. Member about that so that I get the facts absolutely right. We are very concerned about these issues, which is why we have provided more than 50,000 4G routers to homes and the other support that I referred to. I will write to her specifically about the point she raises.

We are funding expert technical support and training to help schools and to help set up Google or Microsoft digital education platforms. Schools can also access guidance and training from a network of schools and colleges across the country that are leading the way in the use of digital. They are our edtech demonstrator schools. They have already produced a library of resources and materials to support remote education arrangements, including support for schools that are less digitally able, alongside guidance about how to make use of Department for Education-funded digital platforms and devices. The programme is proving popular: well over 1,000 schools and colleges are receiving weekly tailored support, and more than 5,000 schools and colleges are attending livestreamed webinars.

To support the hard work of schools in delivering remote education, Oak National Academy, which the hon. Member referred to, was very quickly brought together—I think within two weeks of the pandemic leading to schools closing—by more than 40 teachers, and their schools and other educational organisations also helped them. The Department has made £4.84 million available for Oak National Academy, both for the summer term of the last academic year and for the 2020-21 academic year, to provide video lessons for a broad range of subjects for reception to year 11. Oak will remain a free optional resource for 2020-21. Since the start of the autumn term, half a million users have visited the Oak National Academy platform, and there have been 3.1 million lessons.

The Government are clear that the best place for children is in school, where they can be with their friends and teachers and can catch up with the education that they may have lost when schools closed to most pupils, but ensuring that that education can continue when schools are required to send children and young people home to self-isolate because of a confirmed case of coronavirus is also vital. We are providing the support and devices for the most disadvantaged, and we are providing £1 billion of catch-up funding to ensure that the current generation of school students do not have their long-term prospects damaged by the appalling pandemic that the world is confronting.

Question put and agreed to.

8.39 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 20 October 2020

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

Support for Children and Families: Covid-19

9.55 am

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members for their patience during the security scare, but all has now been satisfactorily resolved. This is a one and a half hour debate; it will start now and finish at 25 minutes past 11. One Member has chosen to withdraw from the list as he will not be able to be here between 11 am and 11.25 am. If there are others in a similar position, they can notify the Chair accordingly.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for children and families during the covid-19 outbreak.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for supporting the application for this debate. We have become used to hearing that the pandemic has exacerbated the inequalities that existed in our society, and that we need to build back better. I do not intend to change that script. I want to start with some observations about family life under covid-19 and draw some lessons for the future.

I was very much a witness to the inequalities under lockdown. I spent it with my family in Wiltshire during the beautiful spring and early summer, watching the barley slowly ripen, under skies clear of planes; cycling on roads clear of cars. It was an idyllic existence. However, every day my inbox would fill with emails from families in crisis. I used to work with children and families at risk in disadvantaged parts of London, and I have some sense as to what parents in overcrowded accommodation without enough money must have been through this year. For families who were already in trouble, financially or emotionally, the pandemic has been a disaster. Rates of domestic violence have soared, alcohol and substance abuse have increased, people's mental health has suffered, and, of course, poverty has worsened.

Save the Children reports that 40% of families have become worse off, and 20% of families have made use of food banks. Personal debt has risen dramatically, and children are the principal victims here, especially children with disabilities, looked-after children, and all those who really rely on support outside the home—support which in many cases disappeared during lockdown, and will remain unavailable in areas under local lockdowns.

I acknowledge how much the measures put in place by the Government have helped many of these families: universal credit, the brainchild of the my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), has worked with incredible efficiency.

It is a tribute to him and the current Ministers, and to the thousands of officials and jobcentre staff who manage that system. The £20 per week uplift has been a lifeline for countless families. Likewise the mortgage holidays, the protection against eviction, the furlough scheme and the self-employment income support scheme. The Government put a defensive ring around families' homes and incomes and I pay tribute to them.

I want to pay tribute not only to the Government, but to the families themselves, or should I say "the family" as an institution. The resilience, capability and adaptability and the hidden resources of care and skill that families found in this crisis are extraordinary. The families are the single most important system for what we used to call social security. They have been the most effective defence against disaster for children and adults. They are the single greatest asset that we have as a country.

I mention this because it is right that we focus on these dreadful problems, but we also need to consider the conditions for success, to accentuate the positive, as Bing Crosby said, not just eliminate the negative. However, to eliminate the negative first, I have two simple principles to suggest to address the current crisis for families.

The first principle is that of greater support around the family through more investment in the social infrastructure of communities, especially civil society, especially through the family hubs that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and others have championed so assiduously and that are found in the Conservative manifesto. I would also like to see expansion of the help to claim and the flexible support fund. We are inching towards the vision my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green has for what he called universal support: a package of help provided by charities and community groups alongside the cash provided by universal credit.

The second immediate step that we should be taking to eliminate the negative, in order to meet the needs of families in trouble right now, is to invest directly in them. I respect the arguments of those who want to maintain the £20 a week uplift for all UC claimants beyond next April, but I would point out that it would not only cost nearly £6 billion a year but that half of those claimants do not have children, and in my view we should focus on households with children, aka families.

Let me finish with some high-level thoughts on how to accentuate the positive and strengthen families from within over the long term, so that people are better insulated against whatever shocks and challenges the next decades will throw at us. Here, I have to challenge what I see as a malign alliance of left and right, or more specifically liberals on the left and the right, who are the dominant force in both our tribes. By the way, I exclude from my idea of "liberal" the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, a Liberal Democrat. Where is he? Not here—withdrawn. He is a sound conservative in my book, but he is not here to defend himself against my suggestion that he is not really a liberal but a good conservative.

Anyway, liberals of left and right might disagree on the proper size and role of Government, but they agree that government and society in general should not try to influence family life. I think they are wrong and that government should seek to influence family life, because it does so anyway; it influences the choices that people make all the time. When it pretends to be neutral, its influence is no less real but is a lot less positive.

[*Danny Kruger*]

The policies that we have created in this country over many decades actively, although not intentionally, pull families apart. Our housing policy has created the smallest homes and our jobs market has created the longest commutes in Europe. We have childcare subsidies that only work for people if they put their kids into a nursery for most of the day, and we have a higher education system that makes young people study far from home for jobs that only exist in big cities. We have a social care system that only pays out to people if they put their parents into residential care or makes them sell the family home to pay for it. Most of all, we actively disincentivise family stability by penalising couples who live together. We pay couples more in benefits if they live apart. We tax people as individuals, which means we tax single-earner couples particularly hard, and then we compensate them in benefits. We then punish them for coming off benefits and moving into work with a very high effective marginal tax rate. I recognise that universal credit has greatly reduced that rate, but it remains too high. We have high taxes and high benefits, and we still leave families in poverty.

In contrast to the malign alliance of liberals who think that family life is no business of wider society and of the Government, I have a view of what good looks like. Before I cause alarm—I can sense the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) beginning to twitch—I should emphasise that I am not conjuring up the 1950s, with the nuclear family centred on the housewife. As David Brooks has written, the 1950s nuclear family, the single-earner household living literally detached from wider kin and community, was a brief and unsuccessful experiment only made tolerable by Valium. As Mary Harrington has argued, the trad wife—#tradwife, as it is trendily known in some conservative circles—is a historic anomaly. The really traditional wife was a trade wife; she was not just a domestic consumer, but a fully engaged player in the local economy. What I am getting at is that we need to recognise and support the economy of households and not just of individuals. You will know, Sir Christopher, that the economy of households is actually a tautology, because the etymology of our word “economy” is in fact the Greek word for household—the oikos. The oikos was the smallest viable social unit, the foundation of society, and we need to strengthen it.

Yes, that means support for one-earner couples. I applaud the work of the Centre for Social Justice and the Centre for Policy Studies, and “A Manifesto To Strengthen Families”, led by the friend of many of us here, David Burrowes. They all call for an end to the couple penalty in the tax system. When Nigel Lawson introduced individual taxation in 1990, he always intended to let married couples share their combined personal allowances if one of them did not do paid work. Mrs Thatcher—possibly like the hon. Member for Walthamstow, who in so many ways she resembles—was not sympathetic to stay-at-home mothers.

We need to get this matter right, so that people who choose to work—unpaid—by looking after children or elderly relatives, or by helping in their community, are not penalised for doing so. My idea of what good looks like is both more old-fashioned than in the 1950s and more progressive; it is both medieval and modern, which I am

sure Members will agree is what we should be aiming for in all things. Two parents where possible, multigenerational where possible, with both parents able to work from or close to home, in paid employment or self-employment, or caring for others without pay, and engaged in the local community. That is the vision that I think would command the support of the public. Middle-class families such as mine had a glimpse of that model during the lockdown, and I hope we can achieve it for everyone.

10.5 am

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship Sir Christopher, as it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger). Unlike with Caesar, I do not come to bury him but to praise many of the things that he has to say—and just for the avoidance of doubt, I am not on Valium while doing it. He and I agree on much of what he has just said. We agree that it is actually about the support for families.

It is always interesting to hear the hon. Member’s perorations about etymological foundations. I come with a much more practical message this morning, because we know that our families are in crisis. The question is—and he and I would agree on this—what can we practically do, as communities and as the state, to support them? We know that supporting families reaps rewards, not just for those families, but for the entire communities that they live in.

I agree with what the hon. Member says about the couples’ penalty and not penalising people for how they live, but I would gently encourage him to look at the penalising that currently goes on for those families who find themselves in the most awful situation: where one family member dies, but, because the family have decided that they do not wish to use marriage as a basis for their relationship, their children are pushed into poverty because, under our legislation, those children are not entitled to the bereavement support payment. If he wants to not just talk the talk but walk the walk, I am sure he will join me in raising that with Ministers.

I come this morning to talk about the defensive ring that the hon. Member has already mentioned in terms of rising evictions and debt, and what we can do now that the defensive ring that he talks about is about to end, particularly when we know that we are about to face a tsunami of unemployment in this country.

It has become increasingly clear over the last couple of months that within the family, it is the mums that are bearing the brunt of the pandemic. Before a child has even been born in this country in the last couple of months, we have had women who have gone to have scans on their own and found out their child would not live; they have had to give birth on their own and health visitors have been cancelled without anybody being told. As the hon. Member for Devizes mentioned, domestic violence has risen. Now, the evidence is before us that it is mums who are bearing the brunt of that approaching tsunami of unemployment. If, as the hon. Member says, he believes that both sides of the family should be able to work and come together as a family, I hope he will join me in calling for urgent action to tackle the reasons why it is mums who are much more likely to have been furloughed and are therefore much more likely to face redundancy. Indeed, the fantastic organisation, which I am sure he is a

supporter of, *Pregnant Then Screwed*, has seen a 450% increase in calls to their helpline during the pandemic. Little wonder.

The protections that many of us took for granted preventing women from being made redundant while pregnant have disintegrated in the past couple of months. We know that it is women who have been doing the working from home in both senses. While the hon. Member was cycling, I am sure that his wife was looking after their three children and trying to home school them. That is not an unusual experience.

The evidence that we have had shows that overwhelmingly it has been women who have been managing children in the home and trying to work from home. Their employers push them to be furloughed to be able to manage that situation, and then they find themselves at the front of the queue to be let go. That is why we know that during lockdown, for every hour of uninterrupted work done by mothers, fathers had three uninterrupted hours of work, according to the research. We know that it is particularly women who are suffering because our childcare and schooling facilities were closed.

What is worrying me now—and I hope that the Minister will tell us they have an action plan for this—is that two thirds of women who want to return to work cannot do so because there is not any childcare. It is a very simple equation: when you have to socially distance three-year-olds—my goodness, I would not wish that on anybody—then clearly there are fewer places, which means that fewer people can put their children into childcare and so an already broken system in this country is now clattering to a halt.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies reported that mothers were 47% more likely that fathers to have permanently lost their job or quit during the pandemic, and are 14% more likely to have been furloughed. *Pregnant Then Screwed* research of 20,000 mothers show that 15% of them had either already been made redundant or expected to be made redundant. It is a generational rollback of mothers in the workplace and of workplaces being able to work for mothers.

We already know from data published on 15 September by the Office for National Statistics that the numbers of redundancies have increased by 45% this quarter. Of those affected by that increase, 79% were women. The high-level data that looks at men versus women does not capture the particular phenomenon we are seeing of the tsunami of unemployment coming towards mothers. It is particularly in the industries that mums work in that we have seen higher levels of redundancies and high levels of closures—hospitalities, retail jobs—and it does not take a rocket scientist to work out that it takes political will to recognise that mums are bearing the brunt of the pandemic. That is why it is so important that we keep that universal credit uplift: we already know that more and more families are falling into poverty.

If the hon. Member wants, as I do, mothers to be able to work and fathers to be able to work, and for them to balance family life as they choose, then we have to make it possible for them to do that. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that withdrawing that uplift would bring 700,000 more people—including 300,000 more children—into poverty. If parents cannot work because they cannot put their children into childcare, then we need to be able to support those families, or destitution

will become even more widespread than it already is. Child poverty has already increased by 600,000 since this Government came to administration, meaning that 4.2 million children are living below the breadline. That was before covid hit.

There are some solutions. In the time left, I want to be clear about that. First and foremost, we need urgent investment in childcare in this country to keep those nurseries and maintained providers open that are desperately needed so that parents can get back to work if they choose, so that mums can make that choice. We need to keep that universal credit uplift. We also need to simplify the tax support we give to childcare. I agree with the hon. Member for Devizes that the state can play an active hand—not a dead hand—in helping it work. Frankly, the money is there. Last year, £664 million worth of tax-free childcare was not claimed, amounting to £1.7 billion over the last three years. Imagine if we could put that into childcare settings, and help get families back to being able to organise their lives the way they want. There is £64 million in the local authority schools budget. The money is there. The need is there. The poverty is there. The question is whether the political will is there. I venture that the hon. Member for Devizes and I share a common concern to make sure that the political will is there, and to do what our suffragette sisters and fathers would ask of us: deeds, not just words.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Before calling the next speaker, I will say that 13 other Members wish to be called and there are 52 minutes left. By my calculations, self-discipline of about four minutes per speech should enable everybody to get a hearing.

10.13 am

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your tutelage, Sir Christopher. It is always a privilege. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger). Sometimes when I listen to what he says in his speeches, I often think that I could have written them. Perhaps I did, I do not know, but then I realise that he used to write speeches for me as well. In a sense, we are a little too heavily joined at the hip. I promise that I will not embarrass him any more on that basis.

I fundamentally agree with everything he said, particularly with regards to the challenges. In a sense, much of what the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), literally a neighbour of mine, says can be meshed together internally. There are ways through this, and I wish we could form some kind of common purpose in all of it rather than attacking each other. Too often, at the heart of these debates is not the question of left or right, but a big difference about whether people think we should intervene with Government or not.

To those assembled here, I make the point that we face real issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Devizes mentioned the tax system. A good example of what happens when people get into government is that they immediately use the argument that we should not intervene because we show a bias towards one side. The UK has the worse tax system for families that wish to stay together. We have the worse system in Europe, particularly where a person in that family wishes to look after their children for a while. Every other major country in Europe has an allowance, and people can move their

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

allowances across. In Germany, they have income-splitting which gives families an immediate balance, which is more expensive to be fair. But in France they have a marriage tax allowance form as well. We in the UK are alone in having not had one for a period, the Labour Government having taken it away. When I was in government, I sat arguing with the Chancellor—I did a lot of that when I was in government—about that very point. Finally, with the Prime Minister’s intervention, we reinstated the marriage tax allowance. However, it was done at such a measly and miserly level, and then hidden so deep in the documents, that nobody claimed it because they did not know it existed. The Government refused to let anybody know about it, until finally they told them about it. That is one of the problems we face with Government.

It is not a case of siding with one side or the other. If we get family life and the involvement of Government balanced, people will make their own choices; that is all I ever ask for. I know those choices will be, in the vast majority of cases, balanced, positive and constructive. Everyone out there, except for the exceptional minority, wants their family to be stable, and would prefer their children brought up with both parents looking after them all the way through their childhood. Government intervene in the wrong way and distort the nature of that decision, and then accuse everybody of asking them to intervene and take sides, but that is not the case.

I appreciate the comments about universal credit and, definitely, about universal support. Universal support, alongside universal credit, is critical in getting people help and assistance along the lines that the hon. Member for Walthamstow talked about. We should all be on the side of getting that rolled out.

Finally, on schools, we have a real problem at the moment. There is pressure on parents as a result of what is happening in our schools. Whole year groups are suddenly being sent home because one child is infected. That goes against all the evidence that children are not vectors to adults, but that it is the other way round. This situation is causing chaos in families up and down the land. There is a good organisation called UsforThem, which is made up of parents who are worried because they have had to leave work and go back home. That has caused real stress in families, and had a real effect on family break-up. It is also causing problems for children, more of whom need intervention and are now under protected schemes.

We need to think again about what in heaven’s name we are doing with our schools in relation to covid. The children are losing out massively, the parents are suffering dramatically, and if we do not get proper advice to schools, we will be buying ourselves a heap of problems down the road, in 10 years’ time. Schools are operating without clear advice on what they should do when children get covid, and they immediately send everybody home. That has to stop. We need to get a balanced view.

I end by saying that I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes’ speech. It was absolutely right; it is on the money. I will not repeat what he said, but I back every bit of it; I just wish we had longer to speak.

10.17 am

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I will be uncharacteristically brief, Sir Christopher. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) for securing a debate on the subject. We have heard so much about the impact of covid on jobs, schools, universities, businesses, the hospitality sector and the NHS. Children—particularly young children—and families are the forgotten element in the whole covid crisis. It is important that we talk about them today, and about the mental health impact on not just school-age children, but parents, for all the reasons my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) mentioned. There has been huge upheaval due to the extra childcare required and the unpredictability of schools.

There is a lack of support networks for new parents in particular. Some 350,000 babies were born during lockdown. Many of them have not seen other babies. Mums have not been able to take babies to the normal post-natal classes and baby groups that they would usually take them to, so we are now seeing examples of babies recoiling when they meet other babies, because they are not used to other human beings like them. They have not had the support network of extended family members; for a new parent, a new mum—particularly a new single mum—that has been a huge challenge. We need to think not just about the catch-up we need for school-age children—the Children’s Commissioner has calculated this week that we have lost 575 million school days since lockdown—but about catch-up for very young children, and babies and infants in particular.

In last week’s debate, I flagged up the importance of health visitors. Before lockdown, we had lost 30% of health visitors. A great triumph of the coalition Government was to create 4,200 additional health visitors. We are virtually back to the numbers we inherited in 2010. Health visitors have had face-to-face contact only with new parents in vulnerable families, but there are over 106,000 children under the age of one living in households in this country where parents suffer from domestic violence, substance abuse or serious mental health issues. These children need those health visitors eyeballing them, providing health support and acting as an early warning system.

I recommend reading the “Babies in Lockdown” report, which was jointly published over the summer by the Parent-Infant Foundation, which I have been proud to chair for the last six years, Home-Start—a fantastic charity—and Best Beginnings. Their report found that 68% of the 5,500 parents interviewed felt that the changes brought about by covid-19 were affecting their unborn baby or young child. Over two thirds of respondents said that overall, their ability to cope with pregnancy or care for their baby had been affected by covid-19, and many families on lower incomes from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and young parents have been hit harder by the pandemic. This can only have widened the already deep inequalities in the early experiences and life chances of children.

The report therefore recommends that we increase specialised parent-infant relationship teams around the UK, of which there are only 30 at the moment. These teams bring together a range of highly skilled professionals to support and strengthen the important relationships between babies and their parents or carers. The report

also recommends a parent-infant premium, which would provide local commissioners with new funding targeted at improving incomes for the most vulnerable children. We need children in schools to catch up, but if we do not help babies and pre-school children catch up, the problem will be even worse when they get to school; that is why this report and this debate are so important.

10.21 am

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I start by congratulating the hon. Members for Devizes (Danny Kruger), for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing this important debate.

Sadly, too many children and young people, along with their families, have been left behind in the covid-19 crisis. Even before this pandemic, with youth services slashed, escalating debt, and persistently high levels of mental ill health, young people were being denied the opportunities enjoyed by their parents' generation. According to the Government's own Social Mobility Commission, 600,000 more children are now living in relative poverty than in 2012. Last year, the number of children living in relative poverty rose by 100,000 to 4.2 million, or around 30% of all children. Four in every 10 children in Leicester East live in poverty. Some 14% of our households are in fuel poverty. This means that too many families in my community are forced to make that impossible choice between heating their homes or feeding their children, and sadly, the Government have not done enough to support them.

Like many here today, I fear that the long-term impact of covid-19 will serve to exacerbate the difficulties that children and their families already face. For instance, the Government's furlough scheme is due to expire at the end of the month, yet nearly 1 million people still on furlough are either living under localised restrictions or in cities on the national watchlist. That means increased economic uncertainty and distress for too many families up and down the country.

The knock-on effect for children cannot be overstated. Indeed, the lockdown has left some children at more risk of harm; at-risk children are less visible as schools and other services close. The number of children referred to children's services between the end of April and the middle of June was 18% lower than over the past three years. This is especially concerning in Leicester, as we have faced localised covid-19 restrictions for longer than any other area, and will put a great strain on local authority children's services, which have already been severely cut over the last decade of austerity. This means that essential frontline services that many children and families in Leicester East—my constituency—rely on will suffer as a result.

The amount that our community received in covid-19 support has also been insufficient. At the start of the extended lockdown in July, Leicester, Oadby and Wigston received £3 million in support, the equivalent of £7.30 per person. That is 1,000 times less than the Government are paying top consultancy executives for a single day's work. As we all know, it was recently revealed that consultants from Boston Consulting Group received up to £7,360 per day while overseeing our disastrous privatised Test and Trace system.

This demonstrates the flawed priorities of our Government; they are happy to spend tens of millions enriching private sector companies, yet leave our families who are struggling to make ends meet to sink or swim. In the past week, they have rejected a campaign led by Marcus Rashford—who was recently awarded a well-deserved MBE—for 1.5 million more children to receive free school meals. Instead, the Government claim:

“the best way to support families outside of term time is through Universal Credit rather than government subsidising meals.”

However, the Institute for Fiscal Studies recently found that 4 million families face a significant decline in income if the Department for Work and Pensions goes ahead with its plan to scrap the £20 increase in universal credit that was introduced due to the pandemic. It is deeply worrying that the Government plan to cut universal credit during an unprecedented economic crisis. That is especially concerning in Leicester East, as last month, over 5,000 of our residents claimed unemployment benefits—a figure that has more than doubled—it has gone up by 3,000—since lockdown began in March.

The Government must increase the support available for children and families during the covid-19 outbreak. Young people did not ask for this crisis, or choose to grow up as it took hold. It would be a generational unfairness of unparalleled proportions if we allowed their future to be detrimentally determined by forces outside their control.

10.27 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) on his intelligent speech, which I fully support. I wish I had made it myself. The pandemic challenge is new, and it has exacerbated problems for many families, but many underlying challenges for families are not new—nor is my challenge to Government today, a challenge that has been made to previous Ministers and Prime Ministers. Essentially, it is this: when will we take strengthening families policy more seriously?

That sounds stark, but I will explain. After years of debate and discussions with Ministers, I am convinced that however committed an individual Minister in one Department may be to supporting families—I recognise the commitment of the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford)—unless we have co-ordinated, Cabinet-level leadership across Government, we will not get far on this issue. At present, there simply is no co-ordinated support for families.

Yes, central and local government are understandably focused on their statutory duties to children in schools, early years and social care settings, but what are we doing for children's wellbeing in the place where they spend most of their formative hours—at home, with their families? The Children's Commissioner says councils spend three times as much on short-term statutory interventions as they do on longer-term interventions to support families and promote children's outcomes.

The Government, working across several Departments, can defend their record on mental health and victims of domestic abuse, and good work is going on around the children of alcoholics, but where is the long-term transformational strategy and effective government co-ordination to shift the dial for so many thousands of children impacted by problems in families? The poorest suffer most.

[Fiona Bruce]

The Cabinet Office Minister, Lord True, said:

“Families are a responsibility for the whole of government ... families are at the heart of this government’s agenda”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 April 2020.]

We were elected on a manifesto that states that a strong society needs strong families. We have seen covid support packages for businesses, the self-employed, and those on benefits. All that support has an impact on the financial wellbeing of families; but what about supporting family resilience? No family is immune from the need for support from time to time, to function well. Parents may need access at this time to support for their own mental health, when things get difficult for those with little children during lockdown. They may need support for substance and addiction issues, finances or housing. They may need relationship counselling or specialist support for domestic abuse.

I am not asking for a family bail-out—for billions for many different fighting funds to fix a dozen different symptoms, however serious those are. I simply ask that the Government commit fully to the bigger picture, given that they have already signed up to this, and for a Cabinet-level Minister to actively bring together cross-Government efforts to strengthen families. They could start with our commitment to championing family hubs. We need a strategic approach, not just short-term tactical solutions. We need preventive, whole-family approaches. Families need help to halt the intergenerational transmission of problems. We need a well-functioning, early help system, in which health education, family support, relationship support and other support for families are integrated and seamless, so that no child or family falls through the cracks.

At the heart of that system should be somewhere that people can connect with to get the help that they need. That should be the family hub. It might be a library or a repurposed children’s centre. Some people will simply get access to it online; but wherever and whatever it is, the family hub should be recognisable to local families. It should be a non-judgmental door open to all—a place that they can turn to whenever they need to. We all need such help from time to time. We must do this. Families need that help; it is not a nice-to-have policy. It must be a mission of Government. As we build back better, let us build families back better.

10.31 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) for bringing forward today’s debate. There are significant challenges for families, not least with the economy bearing down on them now. The biggest solution that we could find would be a way to stop the mass unemployment that we are about to face. I urge the Minister to make representations in Government.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on adoption and permanence, I want to focus on adoptive families. Adoption UK’s survey in April understood the impact of lockdown on families. Following that, the all-party group carried out two shorter inquiries: one was into the adoption process, and the other was into education and home schooling. The witnesses made incredibly powerful contributions, and I thank them.

The adoption process has been significantly disrupted during the recent period, not least when courts have not been sitting. That has had an impact on children, and I ask the Minister to make it a priority that normal proceedings should resume. The priority should be on child-focused court sittings. It has also been harder for panels to meet. We need to find solutions, so that there will be no further delays to that part of the process. Also, of course, it takes longer to build relationships when people are not physically in contact with the young people concerned, so, again, we need to continue to review the process to ensure that the right connections are made in the right places.

The Minister could really help with the issue of medical checks. They have moved from stage 1 of the adoption process to stage 2, but, again, delays are being brought into the system. If there could be an advance there, it could prevent further delay of adoption processes.

More than half of adoptive parents have said that their children have experienced increased emotional distress during lockdown. Essentially fear about the health and safety of family members is triggering feelings of loss and instability for many adopted children. Those issues, combined with the fundamentally restrictive nature of lockdown, have led to an escalation in the frequency and intensity of child-on-parent violence, which is already common in some adoptive families. Nearly a third have reported experiencing more violent and aggressive behaviour than usual.

Covid-19 has highlighted the fragility of many children in adoptive families, and that reminds us all of the importance of the adoption support fund in funding supportive and psychological services. As many children did not receive their established support from schools or health services during lockdown, more demand has been put on the services supporting their families. The additional £6 million provided to enable families to access helplines, virtual peer support and online therapeutic support was needed, but we must remember that this money was brought forward from future funding. I plead with the Minister to see this not as bringing money forward but as putting additional money put into the adoption support fund. I would also like to hear her plans for next year, as this period of uncertainty continues and pressures on families increase, particularly on those with vulnerable children. I ask that we meet that demand, to give those families the best chance of being successful.

Adopted children experience many trauma points in the course of their education, and we have certainly found that issues such as exclusion from school bring trauma not only to the child but into the home. We heard powerful testimony from the head of inclusion at Lincolnshire County Council, Mary Meredith—I recommend that the Minister meets her—who highlighted how exclusion approaches are deeply damaging, especially for a child with disordered attachment. I therefore ask that the Minister looks into the issue to ensure that we can keep children safe in school, not least as exclusions are 20 times more likely for children who have experienced care.

Finally, I want to highlight the fact that thousands of children are currently awaiting placement with a family. We need more families to come forward for adoption and fostering, to ensure that these children have a safe and healthy upbringing. I trust that the Minister will do

all she can, working with the APPG and the incredible charities and organisations out there, to ensure that these children have safe families for their futures.

10.37 am

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), who made such an excellent speech, and I will come to some of the points he made. May I also say what a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell)? She made a powerful speech. Seventeen children in my constituency are waiting for that forever loving home, which I think we all agree is arguably the defining thing in lifting their life chances and their health and wellbeing, so I congratulate her on her work.

I think we all knew before lockdown that strong family relationships are defining for life chances on every measure we care to mention. They are the single most important driver in life, and the pandemic has only served to put that into technicolour. When restrictions started to ease and lockdown was lifted, there were miles of queues around McDonald's drive-throughs, but hon. Members will not be surprised to know that, in the Big Conversation survey published in my local paper, the *Eastbourne Herald*, the most important and missed part of readers' lives was their families. We have already reflected in the debate on the fact that we would like to see family policy far higher up the Government agenda, and it is clearly recognised by the people we represent that family is the original, best and most effective welfare state when times are tough.

My hon. Friend the Member for Devizes is right that lockdown was polarising. Some of my constituents got in touch to say that, actually, during that time, they were able to reconnect and to rediscover and build stronger relationships with their children. Their priorities are going to change going forward. They have enjoyed their homes, and they have enjoyed each other. However, there is a far darker reality around lockdown, as reflected in the work of the Children's Commissioner and the Centre for Social Justice around increased conflict and abuse and the pressure of near-constant confinement.

I pay tribute to East Sussex County Council. The teams there worked so hard during the lockdown months, directly calling more than 6,000 families to try to make sure that the available support was getting to those in need. Their abiding concern now is the unemployment landscape and all the challenges that that will present.

Services are available, but one of the points that I am most anxious to convey is that family support extends far beyond that nought to five category. Too often, people look just at those critical and challenging years, as people step into being a new parent, but we really need to make the case that family support is lifelong.

One of the aspects that I recognise and value about the provision in East Sussex is that the council recognises that families are under pressure and face challenges at every age and stage. Perhaps I speak with feeling as a mother to three teenage boys, but it is critical that we support families all the way down the line—that needs to be in neon lights.

There have been a lot of contributions around the role of the state. Whether it is an active hand or an influence that can distort, both are very recognisable

realities. The state definitely has a part to play in setting the context, in setting priorities and in providing funding measures. However, we must avoid the trap of believing that the Government are the alpha and the omega here. In fact, there is real truth in the saying that it takes a whole village, and I would like to conclude by paying tribute to my personal village.

There are many organisations in my town that have worked hard in this time to hold the fabric of family life together. I pay tribute to our schools, which have remained open throughout. That has been hugely important, particularly for vulnerable children and their families. When I visited the Haven school, amid all the talk and anxiety about children returning to school, I arrived to the sound of children's laughter in the playground. They need each other, and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) talked about that connection—about babies being together, and young children being together. It is so important that we keep our schools open.

I pay tribute to Embrace, a charity that supports the parents of children with special educational needs, because it has been particularly challenged in this time. I also pay tribute to Holding Space, which works so hard around mental health.

Strong societies need strong families. We have a part to play here, and I hope this debate contributes to that discussion. I want to align myself with the call for that Cabinet-level leadership and that whole- Government approach.

10.42 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is pleasure to speak in this debate. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) on putting forward the case very well and with a certain amount of humour, and I thank him for that. It is also nice to see the Minister in her place. She and I were born in the same town—in Omagh, in County Tyrone—so it is pleasing to see her elevated to that position. I will never reach the heights of Minister, of course, but she has, and well done to her. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this debate and colleagues for raising the issue in the first place.

Covid-19 has been incredibly difficult for so many people and so many families. I am feeling the effect of it myself this week, as I lost my mother-in-law to it. The effect on children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren is very real. Our children are aware of things that we would want to hide from them for their safety, and I know there is concern that this age group should be carefree. Hon. Ladies and hon. Gentlemen have referred to that, and I thank them for it. It saddens this grandfather to see so many children so uncertain and unable to do things that their normal lives saw them doing. Swimming lessons have been cancelled again. They can have no meals out with granny and granddad. There are no play dates with cousins. Little lives are disrupted, and that will have implications for their mental health.

I want to speak specifically on mental health, and others will probably do that as well. For some families who have already had their struggles, this isolation and removal from support can see irretrievable breakdowns. We need dedicated and focused support for children and families on this issue from the Government. I am proud that Northern Ireland pioneered the introduction

[*Jim Shannon*]

of a nationally funded school-based counselling service over 10 years ago to support our vulnerable children and young people, and such a service has been adopted by the Scottish and Welsh Governments. It is important now that there is UK-wide provision of this critical early intervention.

Now more than ever, when we are isolating people in their individual circumstances, we need the support of well-funded initiatives to ensure that those individual circumstances are manageable. Some of the teachers I have spoken to in the last months have expressed fears that their children, to whom they give that little bit of extra support emotionally, as well as academically, are removed from them. That happens when schools do not operate as they should, and teachers are concerned that the gap is not being filled.

In Northern Ireland—I suspect it is the same on the mainland—we have rising numbers of those of school age with mental health issues. I welcome the NHS long-term plan commitment that, by 2023-4, at least an additional 345,000 children and young people aged up to 25 will be able to access support via the NHS. That is good, and I am convinced that it will serve a fifth to a quarter of schools and colleges in England by 2023. That is the start that must be made, and we welcome it as a good step forward.

However, we also need to consider the pandemic's impact on the mental health of children and young people. We need to see more ambition; investing in school-based counselling services would help to serve the missing middle in terms of the support provided between child and adolescent mental health services and meeting the needs of the 75% to 80% of schools not supported under the new model. Mental health in the UK has worsened substantially as a result of the covid-19 pandemic—by 8.1% percent on average, and by much more for young adults and women, and those groups already had poor levels of mental health before covid-19.

A further survey—it is important to record this in *Hansard*—by Young Minds found that 80% of respondents agreed that the pandemic had made their mental health worse. Of those, 41% said that it had made their mental health much worse, up from 32% in the previous survey, in March. There are increased feelings of anxiety and isolation and a loss of coping mechanisms or motivation. Of 1,000 respondents who were accessing mental health support in the three months leading up to the crisis—including from the NHS and from school and university counsellors, private providers, charities and helplines—31% said they were no longer able to access the support they still needed.

I want to speak up for the people who need that support. Of those who have not been accessing support immediately because of the crisis, 40% said they had not looked for support but they were struggling with their mental health. That is the issue for children. Urgent steps must be taken to provide help to our families and to keep family units intact and—more importantly—happy, and support is needed for that to happen.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): There are still six speakers and about 18 minutes, so three minutes each would be my recommendation. The next speaker is Jane Hunt.

10.47 am

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and to have the honour to follow the wonderful hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for facilitating this important debate. I almost have to declare an interest in Congleton, as it is where I moved to as a child and grew up.

As colleagues have mentioned, the covid-19 outbreak has impacted on society in an unprecedented way. Indeed, I have had many conversations with constituents, who have raised concerns about the future for themselves and their families. They have shared their anxieties about being made redundant and the financial pressures that that entails and about their children's mental health and wellbeing and the impact that missed schooling may have on their future potential. Parts of Loughborough are among the most deprived in the country, so it is clear that without intervention we run the very real risk of leaving those often vulnerable people behind, widening the disadvantage gap and placing an even greater burden on social services, which are already under strain.

The importance of prevention cannot be overstated. I welcome the fact that the unprecedented impact of covid-19 has been met with an unprecedented package of support from the Government. As well as the financial support available to working families and the enhancements to the welfare system, significant funding has been ploughed into schools to help young people catch up, into local authorities to help the most economically vulnerable and into the fantastic organisations that have worked tirelessly over the past few months to support communities.

I would like to take this opportunity to mention some of the great things that have been undertaken by local people in my constituency recently, which have contributed to the wellbeing of children, young people and families in the area. First and foremost, many of our teachers have worked right through the lockdown to support our children and young people. They have gone beyond teaching to ensure that emphasis is placed on young people's wellbeing, by regularly contacting many children and their families to ensure that vulnerable children, in particular, are safe, cared for and able to carry on their education.

During two recent visits, I have also witnessed first hand schools' hard work and the impact that it has had on pupils. First, at Rawlins Academy, I saw the lengths staff had gone to in ensuring that the school could open safely in September. More recently, at Cobden Primary School, I saw how happy the children were and what fantastic work was being created by the head, the teachers and the pupils. We owe an immense debt of gratitude to our teachers and schools for all they have done. Online organisations such as Amazing Grace, which is helping to bring children back up to speed with their coursework, have also been invaluable to the area.

As well as supporting the community through the initial stages of the pandemic, I have been working with organisations that are looking to the future and on to recovery. For example, Loughborough College, Charnwood Borough Council, Loughborough's business improvement district and Loughborough's jobcentre have joined forces

to help young people into work—the surest way out of poverty—by promoting the kickstart scheme. I am thrilled to say that, so far, 143 job opportunities have been identified in Loughborough, and we only started two weeks ago. That is a testament to what can be achieved when Government organisations and the public work together to support local communities, and it is this collaborative effort that will be vital if we are to ensure that no one is left behind.

10.50 am

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) on having secured such an important debate about support for families. I could fill much more than my allotted three minutes by retelling some of the heartbreaking lockdown stories that parents across Penistone and Stocksbridge have shared with me, but I particularly want to highlight the plight of families who have children with special educational needs, who have really struggled without the support of schools, face-to-face services and even help from extended family.

Early in lockdown, I received this email from a constituent, which I share with her permission:

“Dear Miriam, My daughter is 5, has a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, is awaiting ADHD assessment and is pre verbal.

She has begun lashing out at all family members including her baby sister, she will only eat three foods, she has started smearing her poo on a daily basis, the meltdowns have intensified a thousand times 1000x, and she is sleeping a maximum of two hours a night. I have spoken to the autism nurses, I have spoken to the Multi Agency Support Team, to school; nobody can help and I don't even have a back-up help as I can't see my family.”

For families of children with additional needs, lockdown has been exhausting, but for other households, the picture has been mixed. For families where one or both parents have been furloughed, the opportunity to spend more quality time together has been welcomed. In other families, where parents have juggled an increased workload with home schooling or where loss of income has increased the strain, lockdown has been tough. For single-parent households, the reduction in physical and emotional support has been hard to bear, so what can we learn from the pandemic about how to support families in future?

We need to recognise that covid has stretched the capacity of families that have already reached their elastic limit. So many families, even in normal times, exist on a knife edge. There is just not enough time, money or effort to be a hard-working employee, an effective parent, a loving partner, a carer for elderly relatives, a homemaker, a fit and healthy individual and a volunteer at the local school, so when there is a bump in the road—bereavement, stress at work or sickness—there is nothing and no one to take the strain.

For decades, as has been mentioned by hon. Friends, we have eaten away at family life, with a series of policies that encourage both parents into full-time work. We offer ever-increasing hours of free childcare, without recognising that, for many families, the issue is a lack of work-life balance. We have taxes and benefits that treat each adult as an isolated individual and penalise couples who live together. Those policies have weakened family life, and we must hit reset.

We need to consider the household as a single economic unit, with policies that reduce pressure on family life. We should stop viewing free or cheap childcare as the only solution to families' problems, and look at how we can redesign the benefits system to allow parents to spend more time at home when their children are young. We need to better understand the economic, health and social benefits to society of resilient family units, putting family at the heart of our levelling-up agenda and investing in family hubs. We need to appreciate the symbiotic relationship between families and communities, because strong families build strong communities, and strong communities build a strong nation.

Covid has hit families hard, but it will not be the last crisis that families face. We must not return to the status quo, but instead find a new settlement that gives families the breathing space and capacity they need and deserve to truly flourish.

10.54 am

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates). I also add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) for having secured this debate, because, in large part, children and families are why I entered politics in the first place.

It was my very first day in court: I was out of the classroom, training as a magistrate. I was sitting in the court observing proceedings for the first time with my mentor when a young boy came into the dock. He was 18, making his first appearance in an adult court, but he was grey and tiny, smaller than my 10-year-old son at the time. I remarked on that to my mentor and she said, “Oh yes, I know him. He's a regular in the youth courts. I've known him for years. The reason he is small is that he has been malnourished since he was a child. The reason he is pallid is that he has been fed drugs since he was a child. Because his parents are addicts, he's been an addict for many years.” That was my introduction to a world I had not had a lot of exposure to before.

I referred to that boy in my maiden speech:

“the boy whose name I do not remember, but whose face I cannot forget.”—[*Official Report*, 24 February 2020; Vol. 672, c. 96.]

He was an inspiration to me. I saw right in front of me that for some people the mantras of opportunity, aspiration and hard work, the conservative values that I hold dear and which helped my family and me to journey from workhouse to Westminster in three generations, meant little. What did they mean to him or his family?

The virus has taught us many things, but it has also thrown into sharp relief those inequalities and those problems in our society. Communities like mine in Hertford and Stortford have rallied round to help and support each other hugely. I pay tribute to Hertfordshire County Council and East Herts District Council for what they have done to support all families over this period. I also pay tribute to the universal credit system, the jobcentres and the staff in Hertford Jobcentre Plus, because they have been amazing.

I could say a lot more about what the Government have done to support families of all types during this pandemic, but the economic crisis will outlive the health crisis and there will be more that we need to do. However, I will focus again on that boy in court, because he is

[Julie Marson]

the one that I go back to, and how families like his will cope. They do not cope in the good times, let alone the bad.

I refer to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). Perhaps now is the ideal time to redouble our efforts on family hubs, to provide a place where we can give that intensive, holistic support to families such as that boy's. We do not have a family hub in my constituency or near it, but I welcome the Department for Education's support for a major shift in the development of family hubs. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes for initiating this debate.

10.57 am

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. Following heartfelt speeches like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), I know I am in the right place.

Family is fundamental to my Christian beliefs, so I am extremely pleased to speak in this debate. I want to start with the word "entitlement". I do not believe in entitlement per se. I understand that if we pay for something we are entitled to goods or services, but I hear the phrase "I am entitled" too often these days. However, I do believe we are entitled to good parents.

None of us has to be here. We are here through an act of love—a couple saying that they want a child, which is wonderful—or sometimes, sadly, through a horrible act of selfishness by a forced act. Either way, it is never the child's fault that they are born. With that in mind, you will understand, Sir Christopher, why I believe that we are entitled to good parents. It should just be a given.

It has been proven time and again that a good family home gives children a chance to blossom into wonderful adults. Family life is not always easy—I know. Kids play up. There is not enough money with four or five different people all wanting different things. One child has a temper while another says nothing. There is one computer but two pieces of homework. Many of us have been there and still are. But when family members love one another and can communicate, they stand a chance of creating a great team that will always look out for each other and will need very little help from the state.

When a family starts to struggle, however, whether over money, work or addictions, we should be there to help keep it together. Too often in this place we make it easy for families to fall apart, but not with family hubs. The family hubs initiative is a wonderful thing. I am fortunate to have two in Don Valley. Although I have not had a chance to go and see the work that they do, I hear that they are doing wonderful work. They bring together many services that are often siloed and difficult to source. They bring them online or in person, but what I believe they do most is give a family a place to talk—they help give a family a second chance.

Why is that important? Because family is important. It is also economically important. It is expected that for every £1 we spend on family hubs, they provide between £8 and £12 in benefit. I believe it is much more. Children from complex families are much more likely to require the taxpayer's money throughout their lives, through a lack of work, police, prisons and rehabilitation—the list goes on. Instead of being contributors, they end up

being unhappy burdens. That cannot be right. We know prevention is better than the cure, so we need to ensure that that happens. That is why we are here.

I finally want to mention covid and the additional challenge that it has brought. I have spoken to many people about the positives and the challenges that lockdown brought, but one comment really stuck with me. A friend said: "If you cannot enjoy time with the people that you love, what else is there?" I thought, "What a wonderful thing to say." We need to help more people feel a sense of belonging. Family hubs will help, so I ask the Minister to press for all we can afford, as I believe that we will all truly reap the rewards.

11.1 am

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) on securing this really important debate.

The corona pandemic has had tough consequences. Families across the UK and in my constituency have had to make hard choices and sacrifices in order to protect the health of the nation. This global health crisis has shone a light on the fundamental building blocks of our society. It has forced us to question what really matters and how our social structures operate. Who are the organisations, the people and the community that we look to for support in our daily lives? The pandemic has shown that the answer cannot and should not always lie in the hands of Government. Instead, the value of a rich and meaningful family, community and local support network has been realised.

In July this year, I welcomed the Government's support for a place-based approach to supporting education and employment outcomes as part of the country's recovery measures from the pandemic. In my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent Central, I was delighted to see the Government deliver an extra £1.67 million in funding through the opportunity areas programme, which included support for holiday clubs for children and families, such as Ay Up Duck. Throughout the pandemic, the Ay Up Duck club and many charity organisations in Stoke have shown the value of voluntary and community sector organisations in supporting the delivery of Government-funded programmes for children and families, particularly for the role they played in ensuring that Government-funded meals were delivered to children from low-income households throughout the months of the school holidays and school closures. Since 2018, Ay Up Duck has delivered over 26,000 meals to more than 18,000 children and young people in schools, community centres and sports clubs across Stoke-on-Trent. It is a fantastic example of how charities are an essential community resource in organising the delivery of Government funding that is tailored to specific needs in the community.

Age UK has conducted research that shows that, if we feel more connected to our friends, families and communities, we are much less likely to encounter problems with brain function in later life. It is really important that, coming out of this pandemic, we capitalise on public support for volunteering and working together with families to continue to find ways to harness the economic, social and health benefits of being more connected to our community. Time and again, empowering families, communities and charitable organisations with

the financial and political power to act has proven to be the most effective way to target Government money at the people who need it most.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Andrew Selous, you have half a minute.

11.4 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I hope you are joking, Sir Christopher.

I want to thank *The Sun* newspaper and their agony aunt, Deidre Sanders, for flagging up today's debate with their "Sort It Out" campaign. So let us sort it out for Louis, aged 8, who said:

"My mum and dad spend so much time hating each other, they don't have time to love me",

and for Shakira, aged 14, who says:

"when she picks up her phone and sighs and rolls her eyes, I know it's my dad. I'd pay a lot of money to stop that, she just forgets that I love my dad too and I'm stuck right in the middle".

I agree with what was said earlier on in the debate that the mums are bearing the brunt of so much of the ghastly covid pandemic. We have too many mothers out there forced to do everything by themselves. Those mothers are doing a heroic job, often under trying circumstances, and they deserve a lot of credit, but they should not have to do that alone as often as they do. Raising children is the most important job in the country and it is the responsibility of all of us as mothers and fathers.

As President Obama said in his 2010 father's day address, our children

"don't need us to be perfect. They do need us to be present. They need us to show up and give it our best shot".

Too many fathers are missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities and acted like boys, not men. We need fathers to realise that responsibility does not end at conception. What makes someone a man is not the ability to have a child, it is the courage to raise one and then enjoy the most rewarding and joyful experience of being a father.

A third of children see their parents split up before they are 16, and 1.25 million children are exposed to conflict between their parents. Efforts to support healthy relationships between parents are vital and we know that children benefit from loving parents and strong, loving and respectful marriages and relationships as well. We pass on empathy and kindness by living it; we are not strong by putting others down, but by lifting them up. That is why the work Patrick Myers is doing at the Department for Work and Pensions is so important with his Reducing Parental Conflict programme and why the work done by the members of the Relationships Alliance—Relate, Tavistock Relationships, Marriage Care and OnePlusOne—is so vital, as is the pre-marriage course, the work of Jonathan and Andrea Taylor-Cummings and many others. Also Care for the Family is a fantastic charity that teaches so much, telling parents to stop scoring points and stop thinking the worst.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I am going to have to interrupt the hon. Member, otherwise we will not have time for wind-ups.

11.7 am

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I want to thank the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale

(Tim Farron) and the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing this important debate. I am used to being in a room full of Conservatives, as my parents-in-law met through the Young Conservatives. This important debate has felt a bit like a family dinner, because I have thoroughly disagreed with some things the Conservatives have said while I have agreed with some points made. I agreed with the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) when he talked about vulnerable children. Is he aware of the fact that 2 million children faced greater threats in lockdown, from domestic abuse to online grooming? He also raised the point about the mental health of black, Asian and minority ethnic children and families, who suffered disproportionately in the pandemic, exacerbating existing racial inequalities.

Unsurprisingly, I agreed with my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) when she talked about the pandemic's devastating impact on mothers' earnings and employment. It is not necessary to be a mother with young children, as we are, to realise that our economy will not survive if we do not get childcare sorted and the system fixed in this country. It has been chronically underfunded for years and coronavirus has shone a spotlight, showing there is no doubt that funding is needed if we want to properly secure childcare and get mothers back to work. My hon. Friend also talked about redundancies, that the pandemic has hit women so much harder than men, the fantastic work of Pregnant Then Screwed, the broken system and child poverty.

The hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) talked passionately about her constituency and about wellbeing. It is a word we did not mention much before the pandemic; I feel it was lost. However, the huge changes and isolation have hit wellbeing, with a survey by Young Minds showing that 80% of people have seen their mental health worsen during the pandemic. The hon. Lady also talked about food poverty passionately and how it affects her constituency. There were 200,000 children skipping meals at the height of the pandemic and around one in five children experienced food insecurity over the summer holidays.

I wanted to mention something said by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who has now left his place. I have never in my life agreed with him before, but I agree that there is a problem with schools, and we have to ensure that we fix the problem before the second wave of the pandemic hits us. He talked a lot about access to services, and anyone who does casework in their constituency knows what a problem that has been during coronavirus. Support through schools, the NHS and charities, and other services has been harder and harder to access. Teachers have been unable to identify problems, and that is one of the things that I urge the Government and the Minister to look at as we hit another wave of the pandemic.

I am glad that we are having this debate, especially because we have had so few opportunities to talk about the impact of the pandemic on children especially, and on their families. The received wisdom is that children suffer less from covid than adults, and thank goodness for that but, unfortunately, many times it has felt that children have been an afterthought in the pandemic. We have to fix that. I realise that covid-19 is uncharted territory and that this is something new for the Government. We as an Opposition have tried to be constructive—we want to help the Government navigate

[*Tulip Siddiq*]

the choppy waters—but there is no excuse for repeating the mistakes that were made in the first six months of this pandemic.

This debate is an opportunity for us to examine the mistakes that were made and make sure that they are not repeated. We owe it to children to make sure that we do not repeat the massive mistakes that happened. By the end of March this year, the majority of children in this country were not going to school, for obvious reasons. The issues that arose from children not going to school were predictable. A proper plan should have been in place to mitigate the impact, especially for already vulnerable children, who were always going to be hit hardest by school closures.

School is often a safe haven for children who are at risk of domestic abuse or other threats at home and, because teachers often spot, report and provide support, or because of many children's special educational needs and disabilities, such children were always going to find long periods away from school very challenging. That would often be without the SEN provision that they so desperately need. That was bound to have a knock-on impact on their family's welfare.

I know that the intention of the Government was to keep schools open for vulnerable children but, in reality, if people actually look at the figures, very few vulnerable children went to school. As few as 5% of vulnerable children were going to school in the early weeks of the lockdown. Some children will have been safer at home during covid—there is no doubt about that—but that is not the case for many children. The reality is about ensuring that children at school get the support. That was not made a priority by the Government, and many of those children suffered as a result.

We have all seen the signs of the damage in the casework that we deal with as constituency MPs—the child with SEN struggling to readjust after six months out of school, the looked-after child unable to access a social worker and many more worrying examples. Young carers in particular have suffered during this pandemic. I heard from one 12-year-old boy who had struggled to sleep due to worries about the pandemic and his caring responsibilities. He is now receiving specialised support through the See, Hear, Respond programme, which is run by Barnardo's and more than 80 local charities and community organisations, but many children in that position have not been so lucky. Referrals for children's services fell by 50% in some areas during the pandemic.

I want to pick up briefly on adoption, which my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) spoke about so eloquently. The problems with adoption were outlined in her speech, especially the delays with medical checks, and I hope that the Minister will listen to her plea for future funding for the adoption support fund.

I also wanted to pick up on the point about the decision to water down legal protections for children in care and those with SEN. It was a particularly worrying example of this failure to prioritise vulnerable children. Ministers rightly recognised that local authorities would be under huge pressure due to covid-19 and would find it hard to meet their statutory duties to support children. However, instead of thinking about how to ensure children were supported, whether that was with investment in services, new ways of working or digital outreach, the

Government simply scrapped many of the key statutory duties. So many children suffered in silence as a result of that, and wider neglect has been hidden from view.

When there was an up-tick in schools returning, we have not seen the problems that we know have developed and been exacerbated in lockdown coming to the surface. That means children are still missing out on the support. I ask the Minister, what work is her Department doing to reach out to those hard-to-reach communities?

The other thing I want to speak about is digital poverty in this country. Having an iPad, a laptop or a mobile phone is something a lot of us take for granted, but close to 1 million children went into lockdown without the IT equipment or internet access they needed to learn remotely or to keep in touch with friends. The Government recognised that they would need to deliver digital devices to many families. However, the 200,000 laptops that were promised were nowhere near enough, and the target to deliver them by June was too late for most.

I am sure that MPs in their constituencies had emails complaining about that. The June target was missed, and as the Schools Minister set out in response to a parliamentary question, only 200,000 laptops had been delivered by last month. That is far too late. In a meeting with headteachers earlier this month, I was told that much of the equipment that was delivered was unsuitable for children with special educational needs.

What was the result? Disadvantaged children, who were already unable to access as much learning support at home as their peers, were completely cut off from their teachers, a key factor in the 75% widening of the attainment gap that DfE officials have predicted. It also meant that children could not connect with their friends during the most isolated period of their lives, worsening their mental health and cutting them off from avenues of support.

Finally, on free school meals, which is tomorrow's big debate in the Chamber, the Government have realised that they must act to provide for children who are at home rather than in school. They set up a voucher system, which of course we welcome, but the delivery of the scheme was shambolic. First, delivery of the vouchers was outsourced to a private company, rather than being entrusted to local authorities and schools who knew how best to meet the needs of their families. It was plagued by delays and technical difficulties that left many children without food and many parents facing the humiliation of being turned away from supermarket tills in front of their communities.

Secondly, we had to fight to get the scheme extended, first for the Easter holidays and then over summer. It took relentless campaigning from us and the intervention of Marcus Rashford to force Ministers into a U-turn, and now we are back in exactly the same position. The Welsh Labour Government have committed to providing free school meals over holidays until spring next year. We in the Opposition are calling for the same here, alongside Marcus Rashford and other food poverty campaigners, but yet again Ministers are stubbornly refusing to do it.

Free school meals are a lifeline for at least 1.4 million children who qualify for them—a figure that is now likely to be above 2 million as unemployment rises. I will share a quote from a parent who shared their experience with the Children's Society last month and

whose testimony will feature in an upcoming report. They say: “I tell my kid to make sure they eat all their school meals, as it may be the only meal they have. I often have nothing to eat and any food I do have I give to my kid, as they only get one meal a day. I don’t have a meal many days.”

I want all the Conservative MPs in this room to think for a minute about the children they know—maybe their own children, as the hon. Member for Devizes mentioned so eloquently at the beginning, or their godchildren, nieces, nephews, neighbours or friends—and think about them having to go to sleep hungry at home one night and then wake up the next day knowing that there is no food in the house. Can they imagine the small person they love going to sleep hungry, not being able to sleep because their stomach is rumbling? That is what I would like us to think about.

We all got into politics for a reason; we wanted to protect the most vulnerable and we wanted to make life better for people. I ask Conservative MPs to think carefully about the fact that we are the lucky ones. I never go to bed with my one-year-old or four-year-old hungry. I go to bed knowing that I can feed them the next day. Surely food support over the holidays is the least we can do to help families in this position?

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. We need to hear from the Minister. I call Vicky Ford.

11.19 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): Thank you for your excellent chairing of this debate, Sir Christopher. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) on securing this important debate. It is good to have so many different hon. Members present.

I will use this opportunity to update the House on what the Department for Education has been doing to support children, young people and their families during this time. The Government are dedicated to supporting children and families, and the Secretary of State for Education has been entrusted with the family policy brief by the Prime Minister, to ensure that there is a Cabinet-level Minister with oversight of the issue. The Secretary of State is very clear that the two core aims are the protection of vulnerable children and ensuring that every child has the best start in life. He recently made a speech outlining the improvements needed to the adoption system in this country, aiming to close the gap between the number of adopter families and the number of children looking for those loving-forever homes.

We are soon to announce the independent review on children’s social care with the aim to reform and improve an incredible service that plays a vital role in the lives of our most vulnerable children. We continue to work on the SEN review for children with special educational needs and disabilities. We work with Departments across Government on a range of policies to support all children to grow up in happy and loving environments.

Fiona Bruce: Will the Minister give way?

Vicky Ford: No, because there is a lot that I want to update hon. Members on. As the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said, supporting a family starts even before a child is born. My hon. Friend the

Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) pointed out how important health visitors are, so I was really pleased this month when the chief nursing officer made it absolutely clear that health visitors must not be redeployed from their frontline support for families, even as cases of covid rise further.

Early education and experience set up a child for life and support parents with childcare. Since 2013, the proportion of children who are at a good level of development by the time they end their reception year has gone up from one in two to three out of four. This is why the Government continue to invest and support early years education. We introduced the 15 hours free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds and then 30 hours for three and four-year-olds. We prioritised the early years sector for reopening from 1 June and out-of-school clubs and provision for reopening on 4 July. We have continued to support the sector by paying for those Government hours of entitlement at pre-covid levels of attendance, even if the providers had to close. Attendance is now around 85% of the usual pre-covid levels.

We also know that grandparents and other family members often provide crucial informal childcare. The good news is that those childcare bubbles can still be formed even in higher lockdown areas.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who was born in a wonderful part of the world, spoke about mental health. On World Mental Health Day, we published a state of the nation report which looks at research into children’s and young people’s mental health at this time. Levels of happiness among all children have remained stable, compared to previous years, but children have been anxious about missing education and social contact, which is why it has been so important to get them back to schools.

Levels of anxiety have increased for certain cohorts of children and young people, especially disabled children, BAME children, disadvantaged groups and those with previous mental health conditions. This is why we introduced the Wellbeing for Education Return project, which gives support for schools and colleges, delivered in their local area by local mental health experts. Over 97% of local authorities have signed up to that. We must continue our Green Paper commitment to introduce new mental health support teams in all schools and colleges and training for senior mental health leads and faster access to specialist support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) spoke of a heart-breaking story about families of children with special educational needs. They have faced enormous challenges. The Government have provided over £37 million to the Family Fund to help over 75,000 of those families, including an extra £10 million specifically for the pandemic. As she knows, we are also increasing the high-needs budget by nearly a quarter over a two-year period. In our £1 billion catch-up premium for schools we have ensured that specialist settings and alternative provision will get three times more per pupil than those in mainstream schools.

Fundamentally, it has been so important to make sure that all children can get back to school and get back their support, especially those with special educational needs and disabilities. Over 80% of those children and young people are back in their educational settings now.

[*Vicky Ford*]

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), mentioned that children in care and those children who have a social worker are especially vulnerable, which is why we kept schools open for them at the height of the pandemic. I am enormously proud that we were one of the few countries in the world that did that. Yes, attendance was low, because parents were rightly concerned at the beginning of the pandemic, but it grew over the summer and now 85% of children with a social worker are now back at school.

We also invested another £360 million in frontline charities supporting vulnerable people during the crisis and worked hand in hand with the NSPCC to make sure that people could report—and knew where to report—a child at risk of harm.

We have provided another £4.7 billion to local authorities to help them respond to the pandemic. We know that some local authority children's services are stronger than others, so we have supported those who need extra help by deploying our new react teams across the regions and Ofsted inspectors have come back to the frontline.

Family hubs were mentioned with great passion by my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and I share their passion. I have an excellent family hub in my constituency that offers early support to families who need advice or help. Co-locating such services supports families and providers.

Fiona Bruce: To inform Members, what is happening to the £2.5 million which the Chancellor allocated in the Budget several months ago and which I understand was passed to the Minister's Department to champion family hubs?

Vicky Ford: I will make announcements on that very shortly. I want it to be spent on research and development.

Regarding adoption, data was published last week showing a gap of about 600 children between those waiting for adoption and those waiting for a child. The gap has narrowed, but we must narrow it further. We need to encourage more families to come forward to provide those loving forever homes.

We are investing £1 million in a national adoption recruitment scheme and another £2.8 million supporting the voluntary adoption agencies. Courts have prioritised adoption. Flexibility to the adoption support fund during covid has helped another 60,000 families. The changes we made to social care regulations—incidentally, the Opposition tried to throw them out—were specifically to make sure that adoption could continue while not being delayed for medical reports. However, I take the important point made by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell).

We have put in more support to those who are leaving care to make sure that they do not need to leave care at this time. On the very important point on child poverty and food, we have injected more than £9 million into the welfare system over this period and given support to income protection schemes, mortgage holidays, additional support for rent, and we have done other things to support family income.

When schools were closed to the majority of pupils, we launched the national voucher scheme. It was challenging, but it meant that 1.4 million children who normally received free school meals could still be supported. We also extended free school meals to the children of those families who have no recourse to public funds. Some £380 million was spent on supermarket vouchers, but now that schools have reopened, kitchens have reopened and children are being provided with food, which is so much more important than a paper voucher.

Schools up and down the country are also providing food parcels to those who are self-isolating. In the summer, children from more than 1,800 schools received healthy breakfasts through the breakfast club programme. Our holiday activities and food programme was absolutely remarkable in the 17 local authorities where it was run. We have also announced £63 million for local authorities to provide discretionary financial help to those in need in schools.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who has now left, mentioned that schools sometimes sent home whole bubbles. We have set up a new Department for Education helpline to help schools with bespoke advice when they have cases.

Finally, the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) spoke about the outstanding work that schools and school staff have done to bring children back to school. She is absolutely right, and I agree with every word she said about how fabulous school staff up and down the country have been. We will continue to work with other Departments to put in place significant amounts of wider support. As we know, providing a child with the best start in life means that they can grow up in a loving, happy, stable home environment. That is what we are committed to do.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I have exercised my discretion to allow the debate to go a little longer, because the next debate has been withdrawn.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered support for children and families during the covid-19 outbreak.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Local Clean Air Targets

[SIR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Hon. Members should please respect the one-way system. Clean your microphones before you leave. Only speak from the horseshoe. You do not have to stay for the full debate, but please listen to the two speeches after you. We have had a few dropouts, but please be mindful that there are eight of you, so if Back Benchers speak for no more than six minutes, that will probably get everybody in. If the sitting ends early, I apologise for my bad maths, but this is a co-operative event.

2.31 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered local clean air targets.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Walker. I am grateful to have the opportunity to talk about air quality. The issue involves a lot of different aspects, as I think we will hear from a number of contributors, but I want to focus my remarks mostly on traffic emissions. I wanted the debate to coincide with the recently launched consultation on Greater Manchester's plans for a clean air zone. I am pleased that it has generated interest, and I look forward to hearing about developments in places such as Leeds, York, Cardiff, Stoke and, of course, Strangford. Accordingly, I will try to keep my opening remarks relatively short.

As we continue to live through a pandemic caused by a respiratory virus, there is clearly an urgent need to clear up the air we breathe, especially for those who live in the most polluted areas, such as the cities represented here today. I want to focus mainly on what is happening in Greater Manchester and on the local authorities' planned actions. Also—stop me if you have heard this one before—I want to speak about the additional support needed from the Government to enable Greater Manchester to meet targets that will make a difference to the health of local people. That seems to be this week's theme.

Before the pandemic, we already knew that air pollution posed a serious threat to the UK's health and wellbeing. Every year, 11,000 people die from heart and circulatory diseases caused by air pollution. A report by the Royal College of Physicians found that nearly 40,000 early deaths can be attributed to air pollution in the UK every year. Increasingly, we are learning about the many other issues that air pollution can cause or make worse. This is a cradle-to-grave issue, with new research this month from the University of Manchester suggesting that air pollution can have an adverse effect on children's ability to learn and that cutting air pollution by 20% could improve their working memory by 6%—the equivalent of four extra weeks' learning time per year. That is to say nothing of the wider effect on growing lungs, brains and other organs. Scientists have also found links between growing up in an area with high pollution and the increased risk of developing a serious mental health issue.

There is substantial evidence to show that higher exposure to dirty air increases rates of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and motor neurone disease. Last week, more evidence was provided

on the link between air pollution and Alzheimer's. Even if we take covid out of the equation, the combined impact that air pollution is having on our national health service and on people's life outcomes is extremely worrying. The British Lung Foundation has said that air pollution is the main environmental threat to public health in the UK. Analysis has shown that almost 60% of people in England now live in areas where levels of toxic pollution exceeded legal limits last year. As such, despite the country's many competing focuses at the moment, this is an issue that has to be prioritised and tackled urgently.

Much like coronavirus, air quality highlights and exacerbates existing inequalities in our society. It disproportionately hits people in some of our most deprived areas—often those living in crowded accommodation in areas near busy roads with high traffic congestion. It is worrying, but not surprising given what we already know, that there is growing evidence showing a link between covid deaths and poor air quality. A recent Harvard study found that an increase in fine particulate matter of just 1 microgram per cubic metre is associated with an 8% rise in covid-19 deaths.

Although there was a time during lockdown when we were breathing air that was cleaner than it had been for many years—if there can be said to be any silver lining to the disaster we are living through, that may be it, as it has given us a view of the world without air pollution—unfortunately that has not lasted. In fact, with the reluctance of people to get back on to public transport, there is a concern that traffic could rise to a higher level than pre-pandemic because of private car use. Major changes to people's transport usage led to an initial steep drop in air pollution, but the relaxation of restrictions since June has led to increasing vehicle flows, with traffic volumes now less than 15% lower than typical pre-covid levels, and rising. As I say, they are likely to top pre-covid levels.

Having painted a fairly bleak picture of the problem, I want to talk about some of the solutions and some of the action that is happening locally, on the ground, to clean up our air. Following legal challenges by ClientEarth in the High Court, the Government directed 61 local authorities to bring nitrogen dioxide levels on local roads within legal limits as soon as possible. I thank ClientEarth for bringing that action and for its continuing work in pushing for the most ambitious progress possible on air quality improvement. ClientEarth has acted as a kind of conscience for the public and the Government in this field and has done a lot of excellent work that should be commended.

To focus on the local picture in my area, air pollution contributes to the equivalent of around 1,200 early deaths in Greater Manchester every year. Greater Manchester has historically suffered high emission levels and has a high number of non-compliant vehicles. The Government directed the combined authority in Greater Manchester to introduce a category C clean air zone across the region to bring nitrogen dioxide levels on local roads within legal limits as soon as possible and by 2024 at the latest. That is of course a welcome move, and we know that clean air zones are the best way to reduce nitrogen dioxide.

Greater Manchester is now consulting on key elements of the clean air plan proposal, which includes daily clean air zone charges for the most harmful vehicles but also takes into account discounts and exemptions and,

[Jeff Smith]

importantly, proposes a funding package to support local businesses to upgrade to cleaner vehicles. I encourage stakeholders, businesses and individuals to engage with the consultation, which runs until 3 December, and I ask Greater Manchester residents take part, share their views and help to shape the future plans for our area. In parallel, the 10 Greater Manchester authorities are also running a consultation on Greater Manchester licensing standards, asking for views on proposed vehicle standards for hackney carriages and private hire vehicles, which will have a bearing on improving air quality, as it includes low emissions targets.

Greater Manchester's clean air zone is expected to launch in 2022 and will be a designated area that certain high-polluting vehicles will pay a charge to drive into and within, aiming to clean up air quality by incentivising drivers to upgrade to a cleaner vehicle. All roads in Greater Manchester will be included in the clean air zone, with the exception of those managed by Highways England. ClientEarth has some criticisms of the Greater Manchester plan, including that it does not move quickly enough and particularly that it does not include private cars. Those are fair criticisms, and I hope that Greater Manchester, in looking at the future, will reflect on them and perhaps take them on board. We obviously need to move to a situation where we drive all high-polluting vehicles off the road, but the plans are an important start and cover the most polluting vehicles, such as vans, heavy goods vehicles and older taxis.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes some incredibly strong points. He knows I am a strong supporter of air quality measures and of reducing carbon emissions and the types of nitrogen oxide emissions he refers to. However, does he agree that adequate support needs to be given to private hire drivers and taxi drivers, who are often on low incomes, to help them make that transition? Most drivers I speak to want to make the transition as soon as possible, but they need support to do that, because they are often on very low incomes.

Jeff Smith: My hon. Friend anticipates some of the comments I am about to make, and I am grateful to him for making that point—it is really important, as the current crisis has shown. Many of those drivers are self-employed, and whenever I talk to a taxi driver in Manchester, they tell me that the trade is on its knees and that they really need support to get through this crisis, but also longer-term support for changing their vehicle.

More broadly, it is Greater Manchester's ambition to secure more walking and cycling, which could be a positive legacy of lockdown—we have seen a lot more people walking and cycling. That could mitigate the bounce back to more reliance on car travel and encourage people to improve air quality for the long term. The combined authorities' "Transport Strategy 2040" is focused on changing travel behaviour towards greener travel, aiming to reduce car use from 61% of trips in 2017 to no more than 50% of trips in 2040, although those will of course be largely in zero-emission vehicles.

There is an important point here. I gave up my car about two years ago and I now mostly walk, cycle, use a bus or take the Metrolink in Manchester. I can do that

because I live in a part of Manchester that has good transport links. We have the Metrolink and we have a very busy bus route 100 yards from my house. When I am in London, I cycle to Parliament along a well-designed and segregated cycle route. If we want to change behaviour, we have to invest in public transport and infrastructure, from cycle lanes to zero-emission vehicle charging. The money is there. ClientEarth has suggested that the £27 billion that is currently allocated to the road investment strategy could be repurposed. That is something that the Government could usefully look at.

As well as investment in infrastructure and transport, the clean air zone proposals also need to be resourced. Greater Manchester's proposals include Government assistance to help businesses and individuals upgrade to cleaner, compliant vehicles. Greater Manchester has requested funding from the Government totalling around £150 million to cover clean commercial, taxi and bus funds, and a hardship fund. The hardship fund is particularly important, as we have mentioned. It is designed to support those most vulnerable to the financial impacts of the clean air zone. The Government initially awarded £41 million, for which we are grateful, but there is a lot more to do. The leaders are currently in discussions to, I hope, secure the rest of the money. Can the Minister address that issue later?

The clean air plan was developed before the pandemic. The current consultation will take into account the impact of covid and any changes required as a result of the crisis. Local leaders in Greater Manchester are acutely aware of the fact that businesses, such as the taxi and private hire vehicle sector, have been severely impacted by covid. Government policies to stem the spread of the virus mean that they continue to be impacted. The consultation is considering extra support so that those businesses are not doubly penalised.

It is crucial that the final funding package from the Government recognises the changed economic circumstances we are operating in. It may be that more money is required to offset the financial impacts to individuals and businesses that have already been hard hit by covid. We might need more money even than was initially requested. I ask the Minister to ensure that the Government take that into account and stand ready to provide in full what is needed for the plan.

There is more I could say in terms of urging the Government to intervene to better support these efforts, but I need to wind up. Local authorities are responsible for the local road network and their own fleets, but responsibility for the strategic road network lies with Highways England, which has not been directed to reduce NO₂ in the network in the same timescale or using the same processes. I encourage the Government to look at that anomaly. Greater Manchester has consistently called on the Government to issue a clear instruction to Highways England with regard to air pollution from the strategic road networks that it operates, so that our efforts in the region are not undermined. I encourage the Minister and the Government to act on that.

Greater Manchester is proposing the largest clean air zone outside London, but the funding support guaranteed so far by the Government has not matched the scale or ambition of those plans. Measures that could positively impact on carbon targets, such as an increase in electric vehicle infrastructure and facilitating sustainable journeys,

are still considered separate from the clean air plan by Government. There is a strong argument for the various policy frameworks and funding settlements aimed at addressing nitrogen dioxide, PM2.5 and carbon to be better integrated and dealt with as one, rather than as separate disparate pots. I urge the Government to look at combining them and creating a generous clean air fund that all local authorities can use to fund their important air quality improvement work.

My final point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), who is speaking for the Opposition, might refer to, is that as well as complementing local clean air plans, we need meaningful, legally binding targets and real accountability when the Environment Bill comes back to the House. Can the Minister give us an indication of when that might be? I urge her to incorporate the World Health Organisation's air quality standards into the Bill when it comes back to the House.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): If all Members could stick to about six minutes, I would be extremely grateful.

2.44 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Absolutely, Chair—in fact, I am due to speak in the main Chamber very shortly, so I will probably have to leave Westminster Hall straight after my speech.

When the books are written about this period in our history, what will they say? Will they say that 2020 was a time when human beings were confronted with a problem—a pandemic—which, with difficulty, we struggled through and that we then went back to normal? Or will they reflect on a lost opportunity to learn the ultimate lesson—that for all our technical advances and complex social structures, we can still be undone by a single sub-microscopic cell? While we try to put out the fires caused by coronavirus with drastic, difficult and restrictive measures, each one causing damage to businesses and families, we must also keep one eye squarely on the kindling of our next crisis, which is burning, for the moment, away from the media's attention.

Just as the current public health crisis came with warnings from the scientific community—warnings that were too inconvenient to be properly heard, about a problem whose solutions were too expensive to be funded—our next public health crisis will be no surprise to those who are looking. Our next crisis is an environmental crisis, when the price of Government inaction and lacklustre policy will be paid for by our citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. Words that were not in the common parlance of 2019 are features of 2020: covid-19, coronavirus and the R rate. Without action now, the following words will, in the not-too-distant future, be repeated in living rooms up and down the country: nitrogen dioxide—or NO₂—PM10 and black carbon.

As with coronavirus, we are seeing the impact of our poor air quality right now. The World Health Organisation estimates that 7 million deaths worldwide each year are due to exposure to air pollution—500,000 of them in Europe. Air pollution is outranked as a risk factor only by high blood pressure, high blood sugar and smoking, and it poses particular risks to the unborn, young children, the elderly and those who are vulnerable because of existing underlying medical conditions—we are all

now well aware of those conditions. It is estimated that outdoor air pollution contributes to 40,000 premature deaths in the UK each year. Indeed, a report by Public Health England describes poor air quality as

“the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK, as long-term exposure to air pollution can cause chronic conditions such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, as well as lung cancer, leading to reduced life expectancy.”

Given those stark facts, the problem can no longer be ignored.

Four and a half years ago, eight cities were mandated to solve a problem. One of those cities was Leeds—my city—and it rose to the challenge. It presented the Government with a plan to tackle our air quality issues. Before discussing that, however, let me first give some background information. Leeds, once known as the motorway city of the '70s, is the largest city in Europe without a mass transit solution. Research by Public Health England shows that PM2.5 concentrations are estimated to cause over 1,000 adult deaths a year in West Yorkshire, with 350 of them occurring in Leeds. That represents 5.5% of the total mortality in the city, and has been calculated to be the equivalent of 3,825 life years being lost.

Constituents of mine see HGVs hurtle along the congested and over-subscribed A660. I have met people from local primary schools in Pool who describe their fear as these lorries pass through their village, due to its position as a thoroughfare connecting North and West Yorkshire. I walk my own children through streets that regularly miss their air quality targets.

Leeds put forward to the Government its plan for a clean air zone costing £40 million. This ambitious policy proposal, which would have taken high-polluting vehicles off our streets, came into being following hard negotiation, including having to challenge the then Secretary of State for the Environment. However, in January 2019, £29 million of funding was given. The charging clean air zone was meant to have been implemented by now, but last week we had the announcement that it would not be coming forward.

There are some stark warnings here. We have seen our air quality improve, due to new vehicles being brought in by First Bus, by HGV operators and by private hire drivers, but what will now become of those vehicles without the charging clean air zone? There is a real risk that those vehicles will go elsewhere.

What of the legal limits themselves? The UK targets ensure that readings of NO₂ do not exceed 40 micrograms per cubic metre; the target for PM10 is also 40 micrograms per cubic metre, and the target for PM2.5 is 25 micrograms per cubic metre. However, the World Health Organisation limit for PM10 is 20 micrograms per cubic metre, and its limit for PM2.5 is 10 micrograms per cubic metre. So the Government's targets on air quality are set at much higher levels than those recommended by the World Health Organisation. The solution to our air quality problem in Leeds and in the rest of the country is to raise the clean air levels and to have a new clean air Act.

There are no safe levels of air pollution; there are no levels that will see mortality levels decrease. If current events have taught us anything, it is that we must prioritise tackling not only the current public health crisis but every public health crisis. If we are not to see

[Alex Sobel]

the same things continuing to happen in Leeds, Manchester and other places, we need more stringent legal limits. That is what the Minister needs to take back to her Department today and what she needs to implement. Otherwise, we will see this public health crisis also spiral out of control.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I think we can probably afford colleagues seven minutes, until I let them know otherwise.

2.50 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): Thank you, Sir Charles. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

This is a timely debate. Stoke-on-Trent is one of the 33 third wave authorities, together with our neighbour Newcastle-under-Lyme. Pollution does not respect authority boundaries. Joint work is necessary to resolve issues that have led to a ministerial direction at Basford Bank. Similarly, there is a direction covering Victoria Road, which crosses the constituency boundary. I share that with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton). He is unable to attend this debate, but very much wishes to be associated with my comments.

Stoke-on-Trent is no stranger to respiratory diseases. As a city of pits and pots, it has struggled with terrible lung conditions known, rather glibly, as “miner’s lung” and “potter’s rot”. Dust emission and pollution-related illnesses should increasingly be consigned to the past with the working practices that caused them. Sadly, the city’s overwhelming reliance on fossil fuel motor transport means that this is not so. Just as we have tackled and continue to tackle the causes of industrial illnesses, so we must act to resolve the causes of road traffic pollution.

Let me be clear from the start that we must secure investment from the transforming cities fund. Bus use in Stoke-on-Trent has fallen by one third in 10 years. If we do not get the tens of millions of pounds of investment promised in the Red Book to transform the city’s relationship with non-car transport, it will condemn us to a spiral of further public transport decline.

Paradoxically, despite the high levels of pollution from cars at certain points in the city, car ownership is relatively low. The transforming cities fund is a fundamental necessity when it comes to healing the urban splintering, transport deprivation and inequality of opportunity faced by 30% of people without a car in Stoke-on-Trent. They often live in communities blighted by the most road pollution, which they do little to cause, including pollution from ageing buses, as acknowledged by the ministerial direction on retrofitting buses on the A53.

I welcome the action taken to minimise congestion-related pollution by keeping road traffic moving, not least by investing in the now underway Etruria Valley link road, which I hope will relieve the problem at Basford Bank, and the approved, shovel-ready schemes for a high-capacity Joiners Square roundabout, where the A50 Victoria Road currently has a pinch point with the A52 Leek Road and the A50 Lichfield Street.

However, much more needs to be done to encourage a modal shift from the private car by improving our local rail services, moving to a zero-emission bus fleet

that carries regular and reliable services, making walking and cycling routes safe and attractive and by not stopping traffic altogether.

It is not acceptable if measures to improve air quality damage our local economy and risk jobs. That is something that my colleagues and I, as MPs representing Stoke-on-Trent, have made very clear to the Government on several occasions. Measures to improve air quality at Basford or Fenton must also not merely move the problem elsewhere, to Bentilee, Bucknall or Etruria. A holistic approach is needed to improve air quality across north Staffordshire. I will continue to campaign for better bus services and to reopen the Stoke-to-Leek railway line and the lost station at Etruria.

Earlier this year, local MPs secured a deadline extension for our local councils to develop plans on air quality with the Government. The new reality of covid-19 since then is that traffic levels have dropped and suspicion of public transport has sadly grown. It might be that, even at this very late stage, a further extension would help to take stock of and address this new reality. I hope that Ministers will carefully consider that, and that our local councils and Government Departments will continue to devise measures that will result in improvements to the current reality on the ground.

It is a vital duty of all partners to work together to do that. That includes Highways England, whose A500-A50 strategic highway—that monumental splinter of concrete, cutting through the urban potteries, known locally as the D road—is a key contributor to poor local air quality. It would be a perfect location for the kind of smart trunk road mooted by Highways England in its recent consultations on major and strategic roads. A smart D road could utilise gantry technology to smooth out traffic flows and address specific hotspots, improving reliability and reducing standing-time pollution.

Stoke-on-Trent needs a transport revolution that will improve our air quality while also supporting the city’s continued economic growth, particularly given the pressures on the economy caused by covid-19. We need greater public transport capacity, and that needs a step change—a watershed moment to catalyse the shift to public transport that other cities have enjoyed. Delivering the transforming cities fund deal promised in the Red Book would redirect our city’s future away from road pollution and towards sustainable transport and better air quality for us all to enjoy.

2.56 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles, and an absolute pleasure to follow my friend and neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon). A common theme we are starting to see when we stand next to each other to speak is that she is far more eloquent. She has made points that I probably cannot reiterate, but I will attempt to in my own style.

Clean air is indeed important. Since the passage of the Clean Air Act 1965, this country has made great progress in ensuring that our air is cleaner and safer to breathe. There has rightly been an increase in concern about the gas nitrogen oxide, most commonly produced by diesel vehicles on our roads. In response, the Government have set clean air targets for local authorities to comply with. However, the implementation leaves a lot to be desired.

The implementation of the Government's air quality targets by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs joint air quality unit is, in the experience of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, less a matter of co-operation than of Government diktat. The city council has looked at a range of measures to combat air quality issues in the three hotspots of Stoke-on-Trent, but JAQU discounted them early. The reason was that the time it would take to implement them would exceed Government expectations on compliance. So measures such as car scrappage schemes and the installation of more electric charging points have been cast aside in favour of closing two strategic roads in Stoke-on-Trent—Victoria Road and Etruria Road—at peak hours.

The Department for Transport has cast doubt on the closure of a lesser road to create a dedicated public transport highway as part of the city's transforming cities fund application. The reason it has cast doubt on that plan from the city council and bus operators is that diverted traffic would put pressure on other sections of the network. Yet DEFRA is intent on closing two strategic roads, with no concerns about the implications for other parts of the local road network. The way to ensure that local clean air targets are met is to work with local leaders. The Government must listen to their concerns and let them have the time to implement sensible measures that will stand the test of time, rather than hastily implemented ones to meet an artificial deadline.

In fact, on the two strategic roads, Victoria Road and Etruria Road, natural compliance will be achieved by 2026 thanks to the natural uptake of more efficient vehicles. That means that the Government are intent on spending approximately £13 million of the public's money to create measures that will be removed three years after their completion. That same money could be spent on local initiatives such as grants for upgrades to electric cars to help the car industry through the pandemic or on buying new, modern-day buses for the city. Those are measures that local leaders want and that they know will work.

Finally, I want to highlight the great flaw in the local clean air targets. The largest polluters on the network are not local authority roads but nationally strategic corridors. In Stoke-on-Trent those are the A50 and the A500. By every measure available, they pollute with more nitrogen oxide than any other road in the city. Yet because those roads are managed and owned by Highways England, they appear to be exempt from meeting any local clean air target. Instead of forcing local authorities to remove the grains of sand on their network, the Government must get Highways England to smash the rock on the strategic network. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) shares similar concerns, because of the impact on the town that neighbours us to the west.

It is vital that we finally see investment in our public transport network. That will come through the Stoke-to-Leek line, which will have a huge implication: finally, we will see not only the Beeching cuts reversed, but those further cuts to public transport in Stoke-on-Trent that came after Beeching and which blight the city. Having a bus network with bus routes that spread far and wide, connecting small villages in my constituency, such as Goldenhill or Baddeley Green, is a vital lifeline for local communities and the local high street.

Lastly, to reiterate, it is really important that the transforming cities fund—money that was promised to us in the last Budget—is delivered to Stoke-on-Trent, because that upgrade to Stoke-on-Trent station and the surrounding strategic roads will have a huge implication for the future of our city, and will ensure we leave behind a cleaner, healthier city once we sadly pass on into another world.

3 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Sir Charles. I appreciate being able to speak in this important debate, and I thank the hon. Members who secured it. On many occasions, I have spoken in this House about air quality issues, including how those issues relate to the wider challenges of climate change and the environment. Today, I will talk particularly about some very significant concerns affecting my constituency, relating to the existence already of one incinerator and the plans to build two more burners within miles of the existing plant, which was heavily criticised by local residents and, indeed, myself. It was one of the first campaigns I got involved in locally around the time of my election, eight years ago.

Those plans are deeply concerning. Waste incineration and biomass plants are often dressed up as green plants that are going to provide green energy and green solutions, when they are anything but. They are completely absurd, and sit in complete contradiction to not only our commitments under the Paris climate change targets, but WHO guidance on air quality; the UK's own guidance on air quality; the Welsh Government's guidance on these issues; the One Planet strategy that Cardiff Council has recently set out, which I will come to later in my remarks; and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

The context, which has been set out ably by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and a number of other hon. Members, is the current crisis and the impact of air quality on respiratory conditions. The wider impact of air quality on the health of young people and children is also of deep concern to me. Of course, my concern is about not just the plants themselves, but the trucking to them and the vehicle movement associated with them, and I will go through each of those issues in detail.

I am deeply concerned, not only because of the direct impacts but because these plants are often put forward and agreed to with lots of promises of jam tomorrow—district heating schemes, wonderful green energy and opportunities for local people—and they are often anything but. Certainly, the promises that were made regarding the Viridor incinerator in Splott in my constituency have not been fulfilled, and I am now deeply sceptical of any promises made by any of these companies about what they will do, because they seem to be simply greenwash.

I mentioned the Viridor plant that exists at the moment. I completely opposed it, alongside the Cardiff Against the Incinerator group. It burns 350,000 tonnes of waste a year, but as I understand it there have unfortunately been serious issues regarding the efficiency of the heating and burning process, which mean that the plant does not generate the levels of heat necessary to provide the so-called energy from waste that Viridor trumpeted at the very start. There are also issues with infrastructure

[Stephen Doughty]

access to the national grid, so it is not actually able—I have visited the plant myself—to provide energy to the national grid at the levels that it could do, let alone to any district heating schemes, because the appropriate infrastructure is not in place.

We currently have two other proposals under way. One is for an incinerator right on the border between my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), who will be speaking from the Front Bench today. That burner would see 200,000 tonnes of commercial waste burned a year, 24 hours a day, with 40-plus lorry movements a day in an area that is already highly congested—a residential area where there are difficulties with road access. Some 116 other vehicle movements are proposed—I think that is probably an underestimate—in an area where we have the fantastic, brand-new Eastern High School, which has been invested in, and in other residential areas with other primary schools. These vehicle movements, let alone the incinerator itself, will be right next to where our children are receiving their education. That is completely unacceptable, and the fact that the incinerator is being placed right next to a wind turbine is absurd.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Clearly, the Welsh Government have a really good track record when it comes to recycling—one of the best rates in the UK—so is there a reason why there is this demand for incineration plants? It seems contradictory.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out Wales's admirable record on recycling, which I was going to mention. Because we are recycling so much, the reality is that these plants often truck in waste from elsewhere and, indeed, from across the border in England. I have asked DEFRA Ministers questions about this before because there does not appear to be a UK-wide strategy for the movement of waste around the UK in a way that is both carbon-efficient and responsive to the air quality concerns in many communities.

It would be absurd if we simply became the dumping ground for waste from elsewhere across the UK, with all this stuff being shipped around and the associated air quality and emissions issues. It is also absurd that UK Trade and Investment and the Department for International Trade have been advertising internationally for investment in this incinerator plant, which is in my constituency and next to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West. It is being advertised as supposedly one of the premium projects for investment in Wales. What an absolute contradiction of other things that the Government seem to be saying. There is also the absurdity of proposing to put it right next to a wind turbine, which is exactly the sort of renewable energy we should all support.

I am also opposing the most recent application. Again, notice the name: Parc Calon Gwyrdd, which translates as “green heart park”. It is absolute nonsense, though I will not use any worse words, you will be glad to hear, Sir Charles. It is on Rover Way, behind Splott, a community already blighted by the Viridor incinerator. The proposal is to burn 75,000 tonnes of virgin timber that would be shipped from Latvia, and not even shipped to Cardiff docks, but to Liverpool or Felixstowe for trucking

across the country. That could not be more absurd or more contradictory of our ambitions on climate change and air quality. Friends of the Earth has rightly pointed out that burning timber in this way is worse than coal in terms of emissions and particulates. I contrast that with the approach taken by Cardiff Council, which has just announced its One Planet Cardiff strategy with a focus on replacing single-use, fossil fuel-driven journeys with low-carbon modes and low-emission travel, supporting the transition to ultra-low-emission taxis and buses, a 100% shift to zero-emissions vehicles by 2030, and putting in the infrastructure to support that active travel. It is a big contrast.

I conclude with a quote from one of the local activists whose efforts I completely support. Catherine McArthur said:

“What future is there if your postcode automatically puts you at risk by the air you breathe?”

It is absurd to lock in last century's technologies under this greenwash. My constituency is fed up with being a dumping ground for other people's waste and with these activities going on right next to residential areas, schools and other communities. I will continue to wholeheartedly oppose this. I would like to hear from the Minister what strategic view is being taken of these issues across the UK and how we should be working with the Welsh Government.

3.7 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles, and to be able to participate in the debate.

One of my priorities when I was elected to represent my home city of Leicester was to fight for clean energy and climate justice so that people living in Leicester and across the planet can have a liveable future. That is especially important during the coronavirus pandemic because a Government report in July found that air pollution is likely to increase the number and severity of covid-19 infections. Children are particularly at risk, with those who grow up in highly polluted areas four times more likely to have reduced lung function.

In 2018, the WHO named Leicester as one of the 40 most polluted places in the UK. While we still have further to go, Leicester City Council is taking considerable steps to improve the quality of our air. The latest pre-coronavirus annual figures show that Leicester is meeting all current air quality objectives, except for nitrogen dioxide. Average nitrogen dioxide levels have reduced by over 35% since 2010, when the highest levels, at more than double the WHO air pollution limits, were recorded.

Air quality in Leicester has improved during our extended coronavirus lockdown, one of the few silver linings of what has been an incredibly difficult position for our city. We have been in lockdown, or extended measures, since July; the city with the largest amount of extended measures to date. The drastic fall in car traffic has seen levels of harmful nitrogen dioxide decrease by more than half. In that sense, I cannot wait for us to end the use of diesel vehicles that pollute our cities and our environment to an excessive degree.

However, lockdown is a unique set of circumstances. It is crucial that we keep pollution levels down when people start to return to normal life. The Government

must ensure that the decreased levels of air pollution during the pandemic become the norm and that they fall even further.

Many of my constituents have contacted me regarding the need for a stronger Environment Bill for clean air in Leicester. The Government could fulfil that by enshrining the WHO's guidelines for damaging particles, known as PM2.5, into law via the Environment Bill. Currently, the Bill falls short and merely commits us to setting a new PM2.5 target by 2022. That is not sufficient. The Government have not specified what that target will be. Our legal limit for PM2.5 is twice as high as the WHO recommends. I urge the Government, working with all of us collectively, to adopt a clear legal commitment to reduce these particles, which contributed to more than 4 million deaths in 2016.

The coronavirus crisis has further demonstrated the need for our communities to have access not only to clean air, but to green spaces and interconnectivity. That is why I believe the Government must introduce full-fibre broadband that is free at the point of use, a mass housing insulation programme, and a green integrated public transport system.

It is vital that those responsible for climate chaos—the fossil fuel companies and big polluters—are held responsible for their actions. It is a disgrace that children whose lungs are still growing are disadvantaged by the significant levels of pollution in our cities. We must bail out workers and the planet, not industries that are responsible for air pollution. Large corporations must not be allowed to profit from climate breakdown; instead, they must pay their fair share, as we collectively move our economy towards renewables so that future generations inherit a habitable planet.

Before we get there, it is our responsibility to ensure that the lungs of our children have a future, so that we are not just saving livelihoods, but saving the future lives of children and young people.

3.13 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Charles.

I have spoken many times in this place about the poor air quality we experience in York. That is due not only to the transport system we have, but to the topography of York itself. These serious air quality issues still need to be addressed, most notably the nitrogen dioxide levels, which in places exceed the WHO targets. That is why it is so important that our air quality management area is closely monitored.

We know the causation, but we also know the cost. In my city, 150 lives are lost prematurely each year due to poor air quality. As the research and the science advance, we know more about the respiratory and circulatory problems that poor air quality causes. That could increase as we know more of the science. We know there is a link between covid-19 and lung disease, and, of course, between air quality and lung disease. More research is being undertaken in that area, but the related morbidity needs to be recognised.

York was not built for traffic. As a medieval city, it is more attuned to walking and, today, to cycling. The first e-cycle and e-scooter hire schemes will be seen in our city this month. That will be a real game-changer

for the city, and will enable people to reconsider the way they travel through York, whether they be businesses, residents or visitors.

I ask the Minister to consider the conversation about modal shift. It is one thing to talk about it and to have it in policy and in papers, but until we have that one-to-one conversation to explore with residents what is possible in their lifestyles, we will not see the modal shift to which we aspire. I would like to hear from the Minister what more can be done to achieve that.

The radial road map of York pulls traffic into our city centre. While much has been done to militate against rat runs through residential areas, the proposals to widen ring roads are simply not the answer, nor the way forward. The only outcome is induced capacity and challenges in the future. Every day, commuters are blighted by congestion as the creaking infrastructure suffocates under the volume of traffic, costing York's economy £30 million every year. Imagine if that money was reinvested in bringing about modal shift. It would be transformative.

While Labour has rightly supported the electrification of buses, the City of York Council leadership lacks the impetus needed to bring about the significant change we want. We hear rumours of local transport plans, but there was nothing advanced until Labour laid down at the start of the year the need to have a clean air zone—the first voluntary clean air zone in the country—and to ensure that we are a car-free city centre. Covid-19 has provided an opportunity to see that starting to take place. There are problems because the authority forgot to consult disabled people when putting the scheme in place, and they have been restricted, but it has made a real difference to air quality in the city.

The challenge, therefore, is not to do with knowing the causation. The solutions are evident. The key is to ensure that there is the right accountability in the system, that there is enforcement and that sufficient resources to deliver meaningful outcomes are secured. Local authorities cannot be handed the risks and responsibility if they are not also handed the resources. Ultimately, the Government must be held to account if they fail to enable authorities to deliver change. I fear that the Environment Bill does not have the powers to make the significant difference we need. I echo hon. Members in calling for that Bill to return to the House, and for it to be robust and rigorous in addressing climate change.

I could name many pinch points in York. I fear for residents living in those areas and workers working in them, but also for children at school in those areas where there are high levels of pollution. I call for air quality monitoring outside every school to ensure that we are on top of the data and the impact it is having on developing lungs.

Perhaps the biggest irony we face in York, however, is that the Green/Lib-Dem-run city council is proposing the development of six new city centre car parks, drawing in even more traffic. I am glad that the council has paused one of the schemes due to the pandemic, but I urge it seriously to think again, because that would be deeply harmful and would increase air pollution in our city centre.

We need, instead, a strategy around public transport and active travel in the city. Ad hoc decisions and single interventions are not the solution; they just move the

[*Rachael Maskell*]

problem from one part of the city to another. We need a comprehensive strategy, and that is where the role of Government is important in ensuring that local government plans are robust and effective.

I make five requests today. First, we need to improve air quality monitoring across the city and outside schools. Secondly, we need year-on-year targets to reduce poor air quality and for local authorities to be held to account should they fail to adhere to those targets, as we hold the Government to account here. Thirdly, the Environment Agency may advocate change, but I seriously ask whether it has the powers to make a difference. Strong enforcement is essential. Fourthly, expertise should be brought into local authorities to enable them to put the right plans in place. We know that many local authorities have been hollowed out, not least at the moment, with their finances under pressure. We must ensure that they have the skillset necessary to bring about change. Fifthly, funding will not happen without proper investment in good transport infrastructure to make that difference, ensuring, as I keep repeating, that we can have modal shift. It is the investment in achieving modal shift that will make the difference.

We have an incredible opportunity to drive down air pollution and change the way we move about the places in which we live our lives. York has the potential to be transformative in addressing this issue and becoming a carbon-neutral—or even a carbon-negative—city. That is what we want to see, because it saves lives, it is good for the economy and it enhances our environment. We know what has to be done. The missing ingredient is leadership, and I ask the Minister whether she will provide that.

3.21 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles, and to contribute to this debate initiated by the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith). He clearly set the scene and the subsequent speeches, which covered different angles, were excellent. We in Northern Ireland are committed to clean air targets, and I hope that in the short time available to me I will confirm that.

I sincerely believe that we must take all steps possible to be good stewards of this beautiful land that God has granted us, of which clean air is an essential component. I am blessed and privileged to live in the countryside. During my recent period of self-isolation, I appreciated being able to go out into my back garden and the fields to enjoy the crisp, clean air. There is no question but that I notice a difference in the air when I am here in London compared with that in my home on the Ards peninsula and my most beautiful constituency of Strangford. Even in Northern Ireland, we are finding that there is work to be done not simply to keep the quality we have, but to return to the quality that we had when I was a boy—and that was not yesterday.

I live in the countryside. Buses are few and infrequent, so a car is essential in getting to the shops, to work and to school. We must always recognise when we debate clean air targets the balance that must be struck for rural communities. The Minister lives in a rural area and will understand what I am saying, as will the shadow Minister.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland recently announced the findings from its consultation on air pollution. Its report provides details on air quality, gives a summary of results and long-term trends, and sets out information on the progress being made by councils in managing local air quality. It highlights the redesign this year of the Northern Ireland Air website and the development of the Northern Ireland air quality app. What DAERA is doing works only because the councils are also committed to it. The partnership between the Assembly and the Minister's departmental portfolio and councils is important.

Among the key findings of the report on Northern Ireland's collected data from 19 automatic monitoring stations in 2018 was that objectives for the key air quality pollutants were met in full, but that the objectives for nitrogen dioxide—a pollutant closely associated with road traffic—were not met at three sites close to busy roads. It was further highlighted that levels of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons were lower at three sites than the previous year, after a recorded exceedance of the EU target in 2016. Against a stricter UK air quality strategy objective for PAHs, all three sites exceeded the objective.

One of the spin-offs from the coronavirus pandemic has been less car use and less air pollution. It has been one of the positives to take out of all the negative things, and it reminds us to use our vehicles only where necessary. As hon. Members have mentioned, we should also look at the use of electric vehicles, electric bikes and even electric trains. I read in the paper the other day that there is also the potential for electric planes. My hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) has a company in his constituency that is working on that.

I commend the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) for what she said about broadband. I have a large number of small and medium businesses in my constituency—probably one of the largest numbers in the whole of Northern Ireland, although that is based on pre-covid figures. If we were to have good broadband in place, we could keep people at home and reduce covid levels even more.

Along with DAERA, district councils have a duty to carry out air quality monitoring. Where air quality falls below acceptable levels, they are required to declare air quality management areas. In 2017, there were 19 AQMAs in Northern Ireland. Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council redefined its AQMA to encompass the whole borough. It took important steps to improve air quality at that time, which was certainly good news. The Department works closely with district councils—again, it is important that it does so, because it can provide dividends—and with other Government Departments to ensure that progress is made towards meeting all air quality targets and objectives.

However, it is clear that we must redefine UK-wide targets as a whole and press for local, updated targets. Yes, we might meet objectives for an EU member state—our status will change come 31 December—but it is clear that we need local targets to keep areas with a good quality of air, which is vital.

In conclusion, I believe that the Government must work closely with the devolved regions to update a UK target and to keep us as the beautiful green nation that we have been and that we must aspire to be in the future.

Can the Minister confirm what discussions she has had with the regional Administrations, particularly with the Northern Ireland Assembly but also with Scotland—the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) will follow me on that—and Wales, to ensure that the regional Administrations can collectively make those targets with Westminster? It is always better if we do it together.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr Shannon, for a beautiful bit of timekeeping. We have been juggling speakers. Nadia Whittome, you have two minutes.

3.28 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I am grateful to you for fitting me back into the call list and for allowing me to go and tend to my migraine. I promise I will not take any longer than two minutes—I do not think my head would allow it anyway. It is important for me to speak in the debate, because poor air quality is a silent public health crisis that is harming the lives of my constituents. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) for securing the debate.

Public Health England figures show that over 6% of adult deaths in Nottingham are attributable to manmade air pollution. That is more deaths than from alcohol and road traffic accidents combined. More than 400 people in my city die prematurely every year because of the quality of the air that they breathe. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned, the figure rises to 40,000 across the country. This year, the number could have been even higher, because there is growing evidence that exposure to polluted air increases someone's risk of dying from covid-19. That risk is not borne equitably; we know that it is the poorest people, and disproportionately people of colour, who are suffering the most.

It is no surprise that cities and towns across the country are taking matters into their own hands. I am extremely proud that Nottingham City Council has done that, leading the way in tackling the problem with policies such as a ban on motorists leaving their engines running in stationary vehicles, investing in a large fleet of electric and biogas buses, and retrofitting older diesel buses.

My plea to the Minister today is that local action is not enough. We in Nottingham, and cities and towns across the country, need national action too. If we can afford to spend £28.8 billion on roads, as the Government have pledged, we can invest in green and affordable transport too. We can decarbonise and give the support that our private-hire and taxi drivers need to join the fight in decarbonising our country and our planet. The right to breathe clean air should not be a radical demand.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Mr Brown has been very generous with his offer of five minutes. Thank you, Mr Brown, for allowing other speakers to get in.

3.30 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles, and I am sure that everyone in the Chamber is delighted that I have pledged to speak for only five minutes.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) on securing the debate. He set the scene excellently, highlighting that air pollution is killing 40,000 people a year, that it affects child development and learning, its possible impact on mental health and Alzheimer's disease, and that it exacerbates existing inequalities and increases the likelihood of covid impacts. Many other hon. Members highlighted that as well.

It is a mystery to me, when we look at the 40,000 premature deaths per year and at the strong, serious action we are rightly taking to combat covid-19, why there has been so much reticence to do more about air quality over the years. It really is a mystery. The hon. Member for Manchester, Withington said correctly in that it is shameful that ClientEarth has been the conscience that has held the Government to account, winning three times in court. We need to see much better leadership on the subject.

The World Health Organisation estimates that 7 million people are killed worldwide every year. This is a global problem. Although people are rightly concentrating on their constituencies today, this is a worldwide issue. It is estimated that lower life expectancy of some three years across the world is attributable to air pollution, so again, it is a global problem. We need to work with other countries to fight it. Hon. Members have talked about not relocating issues locally by cleaning up one part of a city and moving the problem elsewhere. That is important, but equally, we need to make sure we do not do that on a worldwide scale. That is something else to take into account.

Many hon. Members spoke about low emission zones, which are required to protect public health and improve the air quality in city centres. Many spoke about funding and Government support, and those are certainly needed. In Scotland, the Scottish Government run the low emission zone mobility fund, which offers cash incentives and travel better vouchers to help remove non-compliant vehicles and provide alternative transport options for people. That is something the UK Government could consider as a wider issue. In Scotland, low emission zones will be introduced in our main cities—Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee—in 2022.

Unlike other hon. Members who have spoken today, I admit that I am lucky in that, like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I stay in a rural area with fantastic air quality. I am lucky that I can go for walks in the hills and enjoy the beautiful countryside, but I recognise that poor air quality is a big problem in cities that needs to be addressed.

There are things the UK Government need to look at on a strategic level if we are to tackle this issue. Aberdeen has introduced the world's first hydrogen-powered double-decker buses. In other words, a whole clean fleet of buses has come into operation in Aberdeen. That could be rolled out across other cities. The UK Government are supposed to be commissioning a fleet of electric buses, so I want to see where that bus fund is. It also supports manufacturing in the UK at Wrightbus and Alexander Dennis Ltd. The Scottish Government have procured 35 electric buses from Alexander Dennis Ltd through £7.4 million of funding, so I ask the UK Government to look at that. We also need to look at the refrigeration of HGVs. The refrigeration units themselves pollute more than the actual lorries that move the goods about, which the Government need to tackle.

[Alan Brown]

On a kind of national infrastructure-type basis, the Government also need to look at the energy efficiency of homes. We badly need a heat decarbonisation plan from the Government, because this contributes to air pollution as well. On that strategic overview, I will leave it at that.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): We need to leave two minutes at the end for the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith). I will leave the Front-Benchers to do the arithmetic, but they have about 11 minutes each.

3.35 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Charles. It is lovely to be back in Westminster Hall this afternoon and to serve under your chairmanship. It is also a pleasure to be able to speak for Her Majesty's Opposition in this important debate. It is good to see the Minister in her place. I am sure that we will see a lot more of each other in the coming weeks.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) for securing the debate and for raising the issue of clean air on behalf of his constituents in south Manchester, the Greater Manchester region and all the people we in the House represent. I know that many other Labour Members would have liked to have been able to contribute to the debate but were in the main Chamber for the Black History Month debate.

This is a timely debate, coming in the wake of Clean Air Day on 8 October. It gives us the opportunity to highlight the importance of clean air, but more importantly to repeat the demand for sustainable, long-term and comprehensive action. Colleagues across the House will know that there are many responsibilities on the Government and on us as parliamentarians, and one of the most important, if not the most important, is our responsibility to protect our environment and preserve our world. A key element of preserving our environment is clean air. It is vital that we remember that our ecosystems are damaged by toxic air and air pollution, as are our waterways and the natural habitats of our wildlife. Of course, there is also the impact on human life, which has been ably mentioned already.

Toxic air contributes to the equivalent of 1,200 deaths a year in Greater Manchester alone, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington mentioned. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) highlighted the premature deaths in her constituency, too. During oral questions last month, I raised the fact that almost 60% of people in England now live in areas where levels of toxic air pollution exceeded legal limits last year. We cannot go on as we are.

The covid-19 pandemic has devastated families, communities and, of course, our economy. The lockdown that started in March 2020 led to an improvement in air quality across the Manchester city region, like it did in other parts of the country, as a result of the reduction in road traffic and the significant increase in active travel journeys. That showed that better air quality is achievable, and that vehicle emissions are key to reducing nitrogen dioxide exposure. However, the relaxation of travel restrictions since June has led to increasing vehicle flows.

Following a number of legal challenges by ClientEarth in the High Court, the Government have to date directed 61 local authorities to bring nitrogen dioxide levels on local roads within legal limits as soon as possible. Ministers have delegated the responsibility to address nitrogen dioxide compliance to local authorities and have set out the process and timescale for doing so, with local authorities now responsible for local road networks and their own fleets. However, responsibility for the strategic road network lies with Highways England, which has not been directed to reduce nitrogen dioxide on strategic road networks under the same timescale or process. That is mixed messaging, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) highlighted, and needs sorting, so I hope the Minister will issue a clear instruction to Highways England with regard to air pollution caused by the strategic road network.

We want action, but we want the right action in the right way, weighing up all the factors. That means taking steps to discourage drivers and to charge where necessary on the one hand, and financial support for local authorities and businesses on the other, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) highlighted. That is vital, because Greater Manchester, for example, is proposing the largest clean air zone outside London, but that ambition is not being met by Tory Ministers in Whitehall. Indeed, the funding provided by Government to date has not matched the scale or ambition of these plans. When the Minister replies to the debate, I hope she will commit the necessary funding to achieve that.

Active travel has an important role to play in developing solutions to this crisis. During the lockdown, walking and cycling played an increasingly important role in essential journeys and exercise, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West. The hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) highlighted the need to reverse the Beeching cuts, in order to increase train travel in a bid to decrease car use. I know it is a priority for my colleague Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, who has been standing up for his region so well, to secure more walking and cycling as a positive legacy of lockdown and to mitigate against the bounce back to greater reliance on car travel.

The Environment Bill, which has been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington and which I prefer to call the "missing in action Bill", should be used to tackle toxic air in England. Disappointingly for many in the sector and out in the country, nothing in the Bill will stop the UK falling behind the EU when it comes to the green agenda and our environment. Indeed, the Government's air quality plans have been ruled unlawful multiple times. Green Alliance does brilliant work on these issues and I pay tribute to Ruth Chambers of Greener UK and all her colleagues for everything they do. In a recent blog, she noted that

"existing air pollution targets expire in 2030, so it is vital to seize the opportunity now to set new limits, exposure reduction targets and emissions targets for all harmful pollutants."

In the Chamber last week, the Minister announced that there is now an end date for the Committee stage, which is great. It is good to know the end date, but we need to know the start date, and we need to know it now. The Bill has been missing in action for over

200 days and it is simply not good enough to be told it will return soon. Can the Minister give us a date, once and for all?

We all know that air pollution is a public health crisis. This summer the Asthma UK and British Lung Foundation Partnership surveyed about 14,000 people with a lung condition and found that the vast majority noticed an improvement in their symptoms, likely due to better air quality during lockdown.

Welsh Ministers in the Welsh Government recognise that we must learn from changes in behaviour and design those changes into tackling toxic air pollution levels going forward. Their plan has a big focus on tackling air pollutants from many sources, including reducing emissions from industry, agriculture and the heating of our homes. I want UK Ministers to reach out and engage with ministerial colleagues in the devolved Administrations, because we need a coherent focus across all four nations if we are going to clean our air in the way we need to. It is good to see the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) here to demonstrate that clean or dirty air knows no boundaries. It goes across the whole UK.

Before I was elected to Parliament, I spent more than 30 years working in the NHS as a physiotherapist, in common with my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). Every day I saw the damage that toxic air can cause to the lungs, health and mobility of people of all ages and from all communities, including those whose lungs are damaged while still in the womb and those suffering from asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and other serious lung conditions. The task of making air cleaner starts with each of us.

It is important that we are all aware of the air pollution levels in the communities we live in, so we know the local challenges facing us all. That is why the Greater Manchester city region, under the leadership of Andy Burnham and my noble Friend Lady Hughes, is right to be ambitious for the area in the fight to tackle toxic air. I hope the debate, the comments we have heard and the determination of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington shows Ministers that we need more than warm words: we need action too.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Minister, if you require nearly 15 minutes, you can sit down at 3.58 pm and allow the proposer of the debate two minutes at the end. You do not have to speak for 15 minutes if you do not want to, but I thought I would say that to be generous.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Sir Charles, you are making it sound as if you do not want to listen to me for 15 minutes. Now I think I will make sure that I do go on for 15 minutes.

It is an absolute pleasure to see you in the chair, Sir Charles. I thank the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) for securing the debate and for the moderate way in which he led it. It is a subject on which we all agree and which is very serious. He recognised that air pollution is the single greatest environmental risk to human health, as many hon. Members from both sides said.

Air pollution has reduced significantly over the decades, but there is much more to do, as has been highlighted today. That is why the Government have a clear ambition and policy agenda to clean up our air. I will be touching on lots of parts of that today. A key part is funding for the nitrogen dioxide plan. We have put in place a £3.8 billion plan to help to improve air quality and clean up transport. A number of hon. Members have suggested that those issues are somehow separate, but we have two huge funds. I am working closely with the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and our joint air quality unit, so that they are increasingly joined up.

As part of this, we are tackling the nitrogen dioxide concentrations around roads—the only statutory air quality limit that the UK is currently failing to meet. We have actually made great strides in tackling nitrogen dioxide since 2010, and levels have fallen by 33%. We are working really hard with local authorities to help them to tackle the hot spots and to reach compliance with the nitrogen dioxide limits in the shortest possible time.

We have contributed £880 million to support local authorities in developing and implementing measures to improve air quality, as well as supporting many individuals and businesses. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned grassroots, that the initiative has to come locally and local authorities have to be helped, but there is a great deal of Government funding and the initiative really is for solutions to come from the bottom up.

The Government have already given over £394 million of that funding to support a wide range of initiatives including bus retrofits, taxi upgrades and traffic management measures. In addition, the Government are investing £2.5 billion through the transforming cities fund to support several cities—including Manchester—to improve their transport systems. This fund was a particular focus for my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon), who is a very strong voice for her area, highlighting the potential benefits it could offer to a place like Stoke-on-Trent, as it has done for Manchester, so I urge her to keep fighting for that fund and doing the good work she is doing.

The Prime Minister also recently announced a £5 billion investment to deliver cleaner buses and improved services, as well as to boost cycling and walking, to accelerate the transition to zero-emission vehicles. A further £1 billion was introduced in the March Budget to extend the plug-in vehicle grants to 2023 and support the roll-out of electric vehicle infrastructure. I think hon. Members will agree that this is a significant amount of funding.

I have just transferred to a long-term electric car rental, a very interesting piece of research I am carrying out myself. I was interested to hear that the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington has ditched his car altogether. Electric vehicles will really help us shift to cleaner air and meet our carbon targets in the medium term.

We need action now, however, and in recent weeks we have had announcements about the first charging clean air zones to be implemented in my old home, Bath and North East Somerset, and Birmingham. Several other local authorities, including Greater Manchester, are expected to follow with similar schemes in 2021 and 2022.

Stephen Doughty: *rose*—

Rebecca Pow: Does the hon. Member mind if I press on? I want to make it clear that the Government are acutely aware of the economic impact that charging zones can have on local businesses and residents, and the fact that those impacts are further heightened by the coronavirus pandemic. It was touched on that the pandemic may have highlighted how air quality affects health and a lot of work is under way and ongoing with the Department of Health and the expert group that has been looking into the effects of the air quality and coronavirus on people's health. There is no clear evidence of an exact link yet, but the work is continuing so we can have a clear picture.

There is always a preference for non-charging measures where they can be identified, and measures that can be effected before charging is put in place. In Leeds, where a charging clean air zone was to be introduced next year, data demonstrates that it is no longer needed, partly because allocated funds have been used to upgrade bus and taxi fleets relatively quickly, and that has had an enormous impact on the city's clean air zone. It will still receive funding to make sure that it keeps to its commitments in the future and is still tackling air quality.

In Greater Manchester—on which we have been focusing today—the clean air zone, as the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington mentioned, is scheduled to be implemented in 2022. The 10 local authorities involved have been working on this enormous project—it is a huge area—to take the action that they need. Their local modelling found that nitrogen dioxide concentrations were higher and more widespread across the region than was predicted by our modelling. We have been working very closely with them and I really welcome the launch of the consultation on 8 October, which runs until 3 December. I also welcome that the hon. Member has encouraged people to take part in that consultation because we want everyone to get involved. We want it to be effective—as does he. The zone will cover the whole of the Greater Manchester region, charging non-compliant heavy goods vehicles, vans, buses, taxis and private hire vehicles from early 2022, with an exemption for vans until 2023. As the hon. Member pointed out, private cars will not be charged for entering the zone.

To touch on funding, we have already provided £77 million to Greater Manchester to implement the clean air zone, and a total of £36 million of this funding has been provided towards the implementation of the zone, while £41 million from our clean air fund has been provided to support the retrofitting of buses and to help the owners of heavy goods vehicles, coaches, minivans and private hire vehicles.

I understand that the Greater Manchester authorities are developing their funding schemes with a view to launching this as soon as possible once plans have finalised. Given the lessons we have learned from Leeds, I urge that the money is put into operation as soon as possible, as that does seem to have more of an effect.

Many hon. Members mentioned the encouragement of active travel—of cycling and walking—and how we really noticed, during the lockdown period, more and more people taking that up. In fact, I think that for four months I only ever used my bike and did not get into my

car; it was an absolute joy to do my shopping and everything else in that way. I have already touched on the £2 billion package for that, and we do need to build on that paradigm shift we need in behaviour to get people out of cars and into walking and cycling, but we can only do that with the funds the Government have provided.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) mentioned the transforming cities fund and how useful it could be to an area such as Stoke-on-Trent; he was very passionate about his area, as he always is. I met with colleagues from Stoke-on-Trent yesterday—we have met a number of times before and will continue to work very closely, as we are doing with all colleagues with a clean air zone—to ensure that we get the plan and project that will suit their particular area, because every area is different.

Several hon. Members—including the shadow Minister: I am very pleased to see her in her place—mentioned the issue of Highways England controlling the strategic routes. I met Highways England recently—along with the Under-Secretary of State for Transport—to raise this issue of whether it could get more involved in those roads, because so many of them cut right through, for example, areas in Manchester and other cities. There is ongoing work with Highways England on that issue.

Before I finish, I must touch on the Environment Bill—which I think was referred to as the “missing in action Bill”; it will soon be an “in action Bill”. There are not many more days to wait; we have the out-date and the in-date will become clear very soon. Aside from all of the work we are doing on the clean air strategy to help air quality, we have our landmark Environment Bill, which will introduce a duty on the Government to set a legally binding target on fine particulate matter. That demonstrates our commitment to tackling air pollution as that is the most damaging pollutant to human health. The Bill includes a duty to set a long-term target for air quality, showing our absolute commitment. As well as setting new concentration target for PM2.5, which will act as a minimum standard across the country, we propose to break new ground and develop an additional target aimed at reducing average population exposure to PM2.5 across England. The target will drive continuous improvement across all areas of the country, and I think it will be a big step forward.

I hear calls to put the World Health Organisation guidelines straight into law, as suggested by the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe). The point is—she has heard me say this before—that the WHO itself acknowledged that guidelines should inform the setting of the air quality standards; they are not targets ready for adoption. Additionally, evidence suggests that there is no PM2.5 level under which no health impacts could happen. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) also mentioned that. It is too simplistic to say that simply adopting those guidelines is the solution. That is why we are setting this system of getting expert advice through, once the Environment Bill has set the target, so that we can work towards achieving what we must on that.

In the Environment Bill, we are setting legal requirements for positive change for local authorities, so that they have more effective powers and a clearer framework for tackling air pollution in their areas. In short, those are

responsibilities across local government structures shared with relevant public authorities, and there is a call for evidence out on that, to work out which bodies are relevant. To support these changes, we will also introduce a requirement to revise and publish a national air quality strategy and review it every five years.

Stephen Doughty: The Minister has not touched on incinerators at all. Does she have any thoughts on that, given the multiple incinerators near her own Taunton Deane constituency in Bridgwater and Avonmouth and across the Severn in my constituency?

Rebecca Pow: I was just coming to the hon. Gentleman's comments, in which he mentioned incinerators, as he often has before. Most of the incinerators he referred to are in Wales. This is a devolved issue in Wales and Northern Ireland. All energy-generating waste plants in England already comply with strict emission limits under the environmental permitting regulations. The UK puts itself at the forefront of reducing industrial pollution with an appropriate framework for regulation. Industry is being very innovative in this space and we are moving in that direction.

To return to the Environment Bill, it contains a measure to recall non-compliant vehicles and road mobile machinery, and to end the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles by 2023.

I cannot end without mentioning the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). As ever, he made an eloquent contribution. Air pollution policy is devolved in Northern Ireland, but it is always really useful to learn lessons from other places, as it was from Scotland, particularly the hydrogen model, which we are looking at. Our transformation of the energy system is neutral, but it is interesting to hear what is happening on the hydrogen buses.

I thank the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington for his clear speech today, and for standing up for this important issue.

3.58 pm

Jeff Smith: It has been a while since I spoke in a debate with you in the Chair, Sir Charles, and it slipped my mind that since the last time you have been awarded a knighthood, so belated congratulations, and apologies for misaddressing you at the start.

We have had a rhetorical tour of the UK in the past hour and a half. I am pleased that hon. Members have been able to speak up for their area. There have been two or three themes. First, we need to act quickly, because the more we learn about the effects of air pollution, the more worrying it becomes. Secondly, we need better targets. I welcome the new targets the Minister has just referred to, but we really need to do more and I hope that the forthcoming Environment Bill will put some of those targets in legislation.

Finally, we have heard many times about the need for Government support. The Minister referred to the £77 million that Manchester has been given; we need £150 million. It is expensive, but there are big economic and health costs to not acting. I urge the Government to act.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): The debate was a great credit to Parliament and Westminster Hall. Please clean your microphones on the way out. We need to leave quickly.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

4 pm

Sitting suspended.

Historical Discrimination in Boxing

[MR CLIVE BETTS in the Chair]

4.3 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered historical discrimination in boxing.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I would like to take the Chamber through the story of a boxer from Merthyr Tydfil. For some people in my constituency of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, Cuthbert Taylor is a local sporting legend. An amateur and then a professional boxer, he had over 500 bouts in a career lasting almost 20 years between 1928 and 1947, many in his native Merthyr Tydfil and across south Wales but also across the UK and Europe. He was knocked out only once in his entire career. During my research, I discovered that during his career he had bouts in the 1930s with two of my great uncles, Jack and Terrence Morgan of Trefil near Tredegar, who were from a family of boxers.

Cuthbert Taylor was once described as “the best in Europe”. In 1927, he won the flyweight championship title. He defended the title in 1928, when he also became British amateur flyweight champion. The same year, he represented Great Britain at the Amsterdam summer Olympics, reaching the quarter-final stage in the flyweight category. He was the first black boxer to represent Britain at the Olympics. Although well known by some in his home town of Merthyr Tydfil and despite a very successful and exciting career, Cuthbert Taylor never got the same recognition on a national or international scale as other boxers. That was because of one simple thing: the colour of his skin.

Cuthbert Taylor was born in 1909 in Georgetown, Merthyr Tydfil, to parents of different ethnic backgrounds: his father, also named Cuthbert and formerly a notable amateur boxer in Liverpool, was of Caribbean descent, and his mother, Margaret, was white Welsh. Cuthbert Taylor was judged at the time to be “not white enough to be British”

by the British Boxing Board of Control, and he was prevented from ever challenging for a British title or a world title professionally by the body’s colour bar rule, which was in place between 1911 and 1948 and which stated that fighters had to have two white parents in order to compete for professional titles. Due simply to the fact that his parents were of different ethnic backgrounds, Cuthbert Taylor would never have the recognition and success at professional level that his remarkable talent deserved. That was all because of a rule that left a stain on the history of one of our country’s most popular and traditional sports, one that has otherwise been known for bringing people from many different backgrounds and communities together.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising this matter. I was just talking to him outside the Chamber and I was saying that that is one of the great things about sport, and Northern Ireland is an example of it, especially in boxing. We have people of different religions, Protestant and Roman Catholic, and nationalist and Unionist, coming together

and uniting in the sport. Sport should be a uniting factor. It should enable people to see one another as they are and not as some would perhaps like them to be.

Gerald Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I agree entirely: sport is a unifier. It is a real shame, and it brings shame on the sport, that such a rule existed at that point in time. It is now more important than ever to right that historical wrong and ensure that Cuthbert Taylor and so many other black British athletes across a range of sports are not forgotten or cheated out of deserved recognition by a cruel past injustice.

The colour bar rule serves as an uncomfortable reminder of a very different time. Although we cannot go back and give Cuthbert Taylor the professional titles and success that his career deserved, we can ensure that he has true and just recognition for his talent and abilities and that his name is not forgotten from boxing history merely because of the colour of his skin. It is a sad fact, but there is no doubt that had Cuthbert Taylor had two white parents instead of one, he would have gone on to challenge for British and world boxing titles—and he may very well have had success in those, too. His is by no means an isolated case in British boxing, let alone in other sports. Many black or mixed race British fighters in that period were held back by the same racism of the colour bar rule.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): My hon. Friend has raised a really important issue. Roy Francis, from Brynmawr, was the first black professional rugby league coach, and he was a code breaker. In 1946, when the Great Britain rugby league squad travelled to Australia, the in-form Francis was not selected for the tour, simply because of the colour of his skin. It was a period in Australia when it operated something that was called a colour bar for non-white people. It is a disgrace, is it not?

Gerald Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that case. It is yet another example of an injustice that stained sport. It is something that we do need to recognise and try to address and put right.

There are other examples. We know of Len Johnson, a black boxer from Manchester who had a highly successful career as a middleweight fighter both in the UK and abroad, and who won the British Empire title in Australia in 1926, only to return to Britain and see his victory neglected by the boxing authorities, and to be prevented from competing for the British championship, simply because his father was from west Africa. As it did Cuthbert Taylor, the colour bar rule prevented Len Johnson from ever winning a professional championship or entering the boxing hall of fame.

That unjust rule, passed into law by the Government at the time, consigned Cuthbert Taylor and many other talented fighters to obscurity and robbed them of the fame and success that they undoubtedly would have achieved had both their parents been white. That is simply unbelievable to us in this generation. I believe that we have an opportunity to right that shameful wrong and make the case to the British Boxing Board of Control to recognise him as the fighter he truly was and apologise for having robbed him, through racism and prejudice, of the chance to forge a fantastic professional boxing career.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour on securing a debate on a really important issue, not least to all the people in south Wales. Unfortunately, boxing is not alone in its issues with discrimination. These are systemic problems across many sports, including wrestling and gymnastics, which we know have been rocked by claims of misogyny and sexism. Ultimately, in order to tackle that, leadership needs to come from the top. Does he therefore agree that the Government urgently need to take more control and responsibility to stamp out discrimination from the industry?

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The historical discrimination we are talking about is now illegal, but we still experience such issues and they are still present in sport. Much has been done since the time of Cuthbert Taylor, but there is a lot more to do, and a lot more we can do, to stamp out discrimination.

In 1947, merely one year before the British Nationality Act 1948 was passed and HMS *Windrush* docked in the UK, the British Boxing Board of Control went on record to defend its colour bar rule, arguing that since the UK was a small country, its championships should be restricted to boxers of white parents only and that black or mixed-race fighters were not penalised by the rule as they could compete for the British Empire titles instead, which the board argued were much more important. Such an argument is an insult to fighters such as Cuthbert Taylor, who represented his country proudly at the Olympic games, becoming the first black boxer to do so. He was a local hero for many in his home town, but he could not go on to challenge for British or world titles as many other British boxers did after turning professional.

The repeal of the colour bar rule just one year later in 1948 came too late for Cuthbert Taylor, who had retired from boxing the year before. However, that very year, Dick Turpin became the first ever black British fighter to win the domestic championship, breaking down the colour barrier to win in front of tens of thousands of people. His victory, which was even featured in the African-American press, marked the start of a new era in boxing in Britain.

As many know, Merthyr Tydfil has a proud boxing tradition and a rich history in the sport, boasting world, European and British champions as well as Cuthbert Taylor. Jimmy Wilde, from Quakers Yard in Merthyr Tydfil is known all over the world and considered by some to be the best fighter of all time. As a professional boxer, he had world, European and British titles as well as the longest running unbeaten streak. Howard Winstone was a world and European champion and Commonwealth games gold medallist once coached by Cuthbert Taylor himself. Johnny Owen was a Commonwealth, European and British champion who also represented Wales on many occasions. Both Howard Winstone and Johnny Owen have commemorative statues in Merthyr Tydfil town centre, and Jimmy Wilde's name features on various plaques and commemorations such as the Welsh sports hall of fame and the international boxing hall of fame. All three feature in the Welsh boxing and Merthyr Tydfil boxing halls of fame and have had their legacies immortalised in many other ways.

Cuthbert Taylor was as British as any of those fighters. he had remarkable ability, too, and no doubt he would have gone on to challenge for British, European and

world titles had it not been for the discrimination he suffered under the divisive system of that time. It is a sad reality that a boxer who was once billed as the best in Europe, who fought in the Olympics and against some who would go on to be world champions, who won numerous amateur titles and who competed in many prestigious venues, has nothing to recognise him or preserve his legacy either in his home town or elsewhere. He will be fondly remembered and recognised by some in both the Welsh boxing world and his hometown, including his family, and especially his grandson, Alun Taylor, who came to my surgery some months ago and who I know is watching the debate.

I am currently in contact with Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council about the possibility of a plaque or local commemoration for Cuthbert Taylor, but there is more we can do to ensure that he is recognised in the way his career and ability deserved. It is perhaps a coincidence that at this moment colleagues are debating Black History Month in the other Chamber. The story of Cuthbert Taylor illustrates why Black History Month is important as an opportunity to celebrate the achievements and contributions of black Britons and reflect on the struggle for inclusion and equality that so many, including Cuthbert, have faced. We have the chance to take action and get justice for him, and to set the record straight the way it should be. Cuthbert Taylor was fighting all his life, not only in the ring but against a shameful rule and an unjust system, with the colour bar of the early 20th century the only opponent he could not overcome. I ask the Minister to make the case to the British Boxing Board of Control for a formal apology and recognition for Cuthbert Taylor. Although we cannot give him the success that he would have gone on to challenge for—that most likely he would have achieved—we can take action to ensure that he is recognised for his ability in the ring, not just the colour of his skin.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): With the permission of the mover and the Minister, Carolyn Harris will make a short contribution.

4.15 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I was actually going to intervene on the Minister, but I would like to say that as my hon. Friend from Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) mentioned the Cardiff Bay Rugby Codebreakers, I was hoping that the Minister would join me in remembering the memory of the Codebreakers, and join me in congratulating the “One Team – One Race” project, immortalising some of Wales's greatest rugby players in a permanent artwork. The statues will celebrate Wales's proud and vibrant multicultural community, honour players who battled prejudice and racism, and be a fitting tribute to everything they did to improve race relations through sport.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) for securing this important debate, as well as all those who have participated. In answer to the immediate question from the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), we need far more permanent

[*Nigel Huddleston*]

memorials to our sporting heroes, especially those who are under-recognised, under-acknowledged and under-represented. The “One Team – One Race” proposal sounds like a laudable idea.

It is appropriate that we have this debate today, because it is, of course, Black History Month. Stories like Cuthbert Taylor’s shine a light on the rich social history of boxing and of society as a whole. It is jarring to think that a sport that, today, is one of the most diverse around had such a history of discrimination. It reminds us that sport does not operate in a vacuum, it is an integral part of everyday lives. As such, it often reflects the values of the time. Cuthbert’s story reminds us of the social norms and inequalities that were present in society and in sport in the first part of the 20th century. From 1911, boxing rules stated that, for a British title, both contestants needed to have been “born of white parents”. That rule was in place until, remarkably, 1948. During that time, non-white boxers were barred from competing for a British boxing title.

Obviously, that did not just affect Cuthbert Taylor. Many other talented boxers over the years were denied the right to compete for British titles due to the colour of their skin, including boxers like Len Johnson, also mentioned by the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. Len was born in Manchester in 1902 to a father from Sierra Leone and a mother from Ireland. He won 36 of his 93 wins by knockout, and defeated the reigning British middleweight champion Roland Todd twice in seven months in 1925. That same year, he also beat Ted “Kid” Lewis, widely regarded as one of the greatest boxers this country has ever seen. As with Cuthbert Taylor, there was no prospect of a British title for Len and many others like them. Although it does not excuse what was happening in Britain, boxing in other countries was also the focus of discrimination. Thankfully, progress has been made. It started in 1948 with the lifting of the ban on non-white competitors. A few months after the ban was lifted, Dick Turpin became Britain’s first black boxing champion in front of 40,000 people at Villa Park, as mentioned by the hon. Member.

Today, British boxing is one of our most diverse sports. Indeed, many of our of our highest profile sporting stars are boxers from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. Great strides have been taken in other aspects of diversity too, with the nurturing of female boxing talent. As I am sure hon. Members will recall, the first woman to win an Olympic boxing medal was our very own Nicola Adams at London 2012. Of course, boxing is a sport that is accessible to people from all economic backgrounds. We continue to invest in community boxing clubs through Sport England and funding through the National Lottery Community Fund. Of course, we support our elite boxers through UK Sport. But no sport should rest on its laurels, and we must take steps to ensure that discrimination and inequality are identified and addressed.

Nick Smith: Will the Minister please support my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), whose fantastic reference to his borough’s brilliant boxing record came over really well? My hon. Friend will write to the British Boxing Board of Control

on behalf of Cuthbert Taylor. Will the Minister also write to in support of Cuthbert Taylor, so that the board will put things right?

Nigel Huddleston: Indeed, I would be happy to do so, but I should make hon. Members aware that I have already notified the BBC that the debate would be taking place and asked that it pay attention. I am sure its representatives will listen and take appropriate action; I am sure the matter is already on its radar. Of course, there are certain challenges. Governing bodies today are not necessarily the same structures that they were a while ago, but I am sure that the importance of the issue is on everyone’s mind.

Like many other sports, boxing continues to look at what more it can do to promote inclusion and diversity. England Boxing has been conducting a review of its operations from board level to grassroots to increase diversity at all levels. So far the work has resulted in additional training for coaches and support staff, and anti-racism workshops. I understand that more activity is in train, such as work to encourage more competitors from BAME backgrounds to remain in the sport once they have retired, and to become coaches and officials. I applaud that work. Diversity and inclusion are at the heart of every successful organisation, but they do not happen automatically. Effort and openness from all involved are required.

The Government have also been alive to the need for ongoing review. Earlier in the summer I called for a review of the code of sports governance, the set of standards that all sporting organisations must meet in return for public funding. The code has proved successful in setting clear expectations on good governance and diversity. Four years on from its launch it is right that the code should be reviewed, to see how it can be strengthened. UK Sport and Sport England are leading the work, which has a particular focus on equality, diversity and inclusion. All five UK Sports Councils are also working together to review racial inequalities in sport. Their work will bring together existing data on race and ethnicity in sport, to identify gaps and make recommendations. A second strand of work will hear experiences of racial inequalities and racism in sport.

The aim of all this activity is to keep pushing for greater inclusion and diversity in sport and to stamp out racism. It should go without saying that there is no place for racism, sexism, homophobia or any other kind of discrimination in sport. We continue to work with our sports councils, national governing bodies of sport, and organisations such as Kick It Out and Stonewall to tackle discrimination in local, national and international sport. Our aim is to increase diversity among sporting organisations and to help the sport sector to be more inclusive and welcoming to spectators, participants and the workforce.

Sport often reflects wider society—often for good and sometimes for bad. At its best, sport unites people and at its worst it can highlight divisions. Fighters such as Cuthbert Taylor and Len Johnson suffered from that. A lot has changed since the early part of the 20th century, but we must not get complacent. Sport does not have to be just a passive reflection of society. It can also be a proactive force and lead the way for others to follow. It can show what can be achieved. We should remember Cuthbert Taylor, Len Johnson and others like them and

keep their stories alive with memorials, as the hon. Member for Swansea East mentioned, and in many other ways. We should think about what we can learn from the past, and look forward to ensure that we build a stronger, more inclusive society.

I thank the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, who raised this important issue today. As I have said, I have already notified the British Boxing Board of Control that the debate is taking place, and I am confident that the board will have listened to what he and others had to say. I encourage it to give due regard to his comments and requests.

Question put and agreed to.

Colleges and Skills: Covid-19

4.28 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of colleges in a skills-led recovery from the covid-19 outbreak.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. There are a large number of colleagues looking to speak in the debate, and thus I will seek to keep my comments brief and very much to set the scene.

I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this debate during Colleges Week. This is the third Colleges Week celebration since the launch of the Love Our Colleges campaign in 2018. The week provides the opportunity to showcase and celebrate the role of colleges, 82% of which were graded either “good” or “outstanding” last year by Ofsted.

College education is something that we do well in the UK, but at times we unintentionally undervalue our colleges, which are at the heart of so many communities right across the country. In 2020, more than ever, colleges have demonstrated their value in supporting learners and businesses to deliver quality learning and training despite the challenges raised by the covid pandemic. Colleges have supported students through exam confusion, launched T-levels and adopted programmes for the safe delivery of learning both in person and online. It is also important to thank colleges for the role that they have played during the pandemic in supporting their local communities. East Coast College in Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth created wellbeing packs that it distributed to care homes. Eight staff members cycled to Mount Snowdon and back—bear in mind that it is the most easterly college in the UK. They raised funds for the college’s food bank, and student Jasmine Foster created facemasks that she distributed to nursery colleagues, elderly neighbours and friends.

We face an enormous challenge as we emerge from covid-19 at the same time as we fully enter the post-Brexit world. There can be an exciting future ahead, but we shall secure it only if colleges are given the opportunity to play a lead role, are fully supported and are properly funded.

There has been college education in the UK for a long time. In 1874, the first art classes were held at St John’s School in Lowestoft, the forerunner of what is now East Coast College, with campuses in both Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth. College education began to take a more co-ordinated form in 1890, when county councils were provided with Government funding to develop technical education. It is fair to say that successive Governments in the first part of the 21st century have not paid sufficient attention to the sector. The focus on higher education is important, but it should not come at the expense of further education, and the sector took too much of the brunt of the deficit reduction strategy after the banking crisis.

In the last three years—indeed, in the last few weeks—there have been positive signs that the Government recognise the lead role that colleges must play in the covid recovery. The industrial strategy published in 2017, and last year’s Augur review, set the scene. The Chancellor highlighted the importance of colleges in his plan for jobs in July, and

[Peter Aldous]

in his winter economy plan last month. On 29 September, the Prime Minister gave his lifelong learning pledge in a speech at Exeter College.

The foundation stone has been laid, but the country cannot afford a false dawn and we must now deliver. Our colleges are up for the challenge of working collaboratively with the Government and employers, both large and small, to support people and businesses through covid, to help people retrain and reskill, and to improve social mobility so that young people—wherever they live and whatever their circumstances—have the opportunity to realise their full potential.

From the early stages of the pandemic, it has been clear that covid will have a huge negative impact on employment—an impact that we have not seen for 90 years. The Resolution Foundation's report on "Young workers in the coronavirus crisis", which was published in May, concluded that young people and adults with lower qualifications are particularly at risk of unemployment. Many people facing redundancy or unemployment want to retrain in order to enhance their skills levels and to increase their job prospects. Colleges will play a crucial role in providing that education and training, and it is vital that they are properly resourced and supported. The funding and prioritisation of colleges must take centre stage in the comprehensive spending review, and the opportunity must be taken with the forthcoming further education White Paper to prioritise colleges and to restructure the systems within which they operate.

As highlighted by the Association of Colleges, the following specific issues need to be addressed. College business centres should be established. The Departments for Education and for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy should work together to set up specific college business centres that support employers with expert advice. There should be a new deal for college funding, with a new funding formula and rates rising towards £5,000 per student. The increase in capital spending that the Government have provided is welcome, but the Treasury should also allow for further investment in IT and the development of specialist provision. Funding levels should also be appropriate to enable colleges to move towards the 2050 net zero target. A second stage of the kickstart programme should be developed by the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions, to enable those who lose their jobs to retrain.

To assist left-behind areas in levelling up, the shared prosperity fund and the towns fund should supplement existing skills policy in areas where economic activity is lower and unemployment higher than elsewhere. In Lowestoft, East Coast College is playing an important role in the preparation of the towns fund bid that will be submitted shortly.

Rightly, there has been much talk about the role of house building and upgrading infrastructure in the recovery from covid. If they are to play that role, we need to address the construction and engineering skills shortages that the Federation of Master Builders and the Royal Academy of Engineering have highlighted. More young people should be encouraged to follow careers in construction and engineering. There should also be better support for small and medium-sized enterprises in the sector, which undertake 71% of the construction

industry's training. There is a need to recognise the role that colleges can play in helping new entrants into the industry, and more must be done to strengthen their links with businesses.

I shall conclude by going local and highlighting East Coast College's role in the economic recovery on the East Anglian coast. The college has just achieved an Ofsted rating of good. Its total economic impact is estimated at £264 million per annum and its £11.7 million energy skills centre for the east coast opened last year. There are great opportunities in our area. We are on the doorstep of two of the largest infrastructure projects in the world: the cluster of wind farms in the southern North sea; and the proposed Sizewell C nuclear power station 24 miles to the south. There are also the exciting reef plans to revive the East Anglian fishing industry. These are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for an area that has been left behind, but we will only realise them if the right investment is made in East Coast College, which itself is very much up for the challenge.

The Independent Commission on the College of the Future is due to report in the next few weeks, and it is likely that it will emphasise that the college of the future will be central to delivering a fair, more sustainable and more prosperous society. It is vital that colleges are given the opportunity, the support and the resources to play this lead role. If they are, a lot of people will benefit, a lot of places will benefit, and as a country we will benefit, as we bridge that stubborn productivity gap.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. In order to ensure that we have enough time for the winding-up speeches and a response from the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), I will begin by giving hon. Members five minutes in which to speak, but I may have to drop that to four minutes at some point.

4.38 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing this important and timely debate—as he said, it falls in Colleges Week. Colleges and the further education sector as a whole have been close to my heart for a number of years. One of my jobs before entering this place was at Sheffield College. I went on to serve on the college's board of governors and came to develop a deep appreciation for the way colleges can teach new skills, regardless of a learner's age.

Education is our greatest tool in combating poverty and deprivation. Colleges well and truly play their part in doing that, with 54% of adult learners coming from the 40% most deprived areas in the country. They are vital for delivering skills-based learning, and those who teach in them are a testament to the quality of the teaching profession. That is evident, with four out of five colleges being rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted.

On many occasions, I have called for increased funding for the further education sector and for the Government to recognise the power that the Cinderella sector could have in bridging attainment gaps, developing skilled workers and giving those from working-class communities greater opportunities. Colleges, when properly funded, are places of great educational power.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): The hon. Lady just called the FE sector the Cinderella sector, which I have always opposed. I know that she is making her speech, but would she not agree that it is worth remembering that Cinderella became a member of the royal family and we should banish the ugly sisters of snobbery, intolerance and underfunding?

Gill Furniss: I do love a fairy tale, but I will touch on that later on.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the impact that the previous 10 years have had on the sector's finances. The brutal cuts to the further education sector have been felt most harshly by adult learners. In real terms, 35% of adult education funding has been cut since 2013. Over the same period, funding for those aged 16 to 19 has fallen by 7%. Those cuts have meant that fewer adults can learn core skills such as literacy and maths to be able to meet many jobs' English and maths requirements.

The National Audit Office has said the FE sector's financial health is fragile, warning that core funding has fallen significantly. The Government have had to intervene in half of colleges to prevent or address financial difficulty. There are too many examples where schools have received further funding while colleges have been ignored. I have spoken to staff at my local college and the morale among both teaching and support staff, who are now being asked to do more, is incredibly low. To add to that low morale and the sense of being ignored, when the Education Secretary announced a pay rise for schoolteachers, he made no such announcement for further education lecturers. The gap in pay between schoolteachers and FE lecturers now stands at just over £9,000 a year.

That background meant many of us were already deeply concerned about FE funding. Then the coronavirus pandemic highlighted more clearly than ever before the truly devastating consequence of widespread cuts. After a decade of cuts, I want to be able to welcome wholeheartedly the Prime Minister's announcement of the lifetime skills guarantee. However, I fear that it is too little, too late and too slow.

We are facing an unprecedented crisis. Levels of unemployment have risen sharply while earnings have fallen across many sectors as a result of the economic impact of covid-19. In my constituency of Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, the number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits has almost doubled since March, accounting for 9.5% of the working-age population. Colleges cannot wait for the funding to trickle through over the course of this Parliament; action must be taken to address the challenges they face now.

In our recovery, we have the opportunity to bridge the skills gap in a way we never have before. However, I feel that the Government are not being that ambitious. The introduction of the job support scheme at the start of next month will see many workers on reduced hours. I believe that the Government should integrate training into the scheme and allow workers to improve their skills. I am also concerned that the lifetime skills guarantee appears to offer little to those who have a level 3 qualification or above. People with qualifications of all levels have felt the impact of covid-19 and, sadly, many with a level 3 qualification or above will lose their jobs.

Therefore, people with qualifications of all levels who will face unemployment should be able to access college courses and reskill should they need and want to do so.

The crisis in social care is an example of where cuts to colleges have had a wider impact. Since 2010, qualifications for health and social care have fallen by 68%. Year after year, we have been promised reform in social care. Instead, we have seen a consistent failure to boost the number of workers in social care or implement any long-term plan. There can be no doubt that after the events of this year the need for an effective social care system is paramount. Colleges can and should play a leading role in training future health and social care workers, and they should receive full Government support to bring the level of qualifications back to their previous levels, at the very least.

With the further education White Paper and spending review on the horizon, I urge the Minister to take the points raised in this debate and the strength of feeling in which they are made back to the Chancellor to urge him to fund our further education sector properly. I wait apprehensively for any announcement and hope that the finances needed to upskill our workforce will be provided. In the meantime, Labour will continue the fight for more funding for further education, and I will continue to proudly back the Love Our Colleges campaign.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We will have to reduce the time limit to four minutes. I may have to take it down further, now that other Members have arrived. I call Robert Halfon, Chair of the Education Committee.

4.45 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on initiating the debate.

We are in a potential golden age for further education. We have a Secretary of State who went to an FE college, and who has made a ground-breaking speech on further education—I think it was one of the most important education speeches that I have heard in many years. We have a Minister for Skills who, I think, is the only MP who has done a degree apprenticeship and is absolutely passionate about furthering apprenticeships. We are talking about apprenticeships and skills in a way that we have not done for a long time.

I welcome the increase in funding that is going into further education. I see it at my local Harlow College, which I have visited over 90 times since becoming a Member of Parliament. It is not just a place of learning, but a community asset and an important place of social capital. We have an incredible advanced manufacturing centre and money for a new maths centre. I hope that when we are out of covid the Minister will come to see the work that Harlow College does. We should also acknowledge the extra £1.5 billion for refurbishing the college estate; the capital funding of £290 million for new institutes of technology and the money for T-levels, which I think will be a great educational reform.

As the Secretary of State has said, FE has historically been underfunded. We need a long-term plan for FE—something that we argued for in my previous Education Committee, before 2019. We need a 10-year plan for college funding. We found that sometimes initiative-it-is

[Robert Halfon]

was standing in for long-term vision and the sector needed more money going into the base rate of funding, over small pots of funding.

There is a social justice case for a pupil premium to support disadvantaged 16 to 19-year-olds. We have to get the basics right. We know that the National Audit Office has found the state of some of the college estate to be grim. The Government have had to intervene in 48% of colleges as a result of their financial health, and have spent £253 million in financial support to colleges over the last few years.

I am very excited to hear about the lifetime skills guarantee and the work being done to encourage businesses to hire apprenticeships. These are absolutely central to our colleges. I urge the Minister to consider whether the apprenticeship levy pot could be fine-tuned so that companies can use more of their levy if they hire younger people from 16 to 19 years, people from disadvantaged backgrounds and people who are going to meet our skills needs where we have huge skills deficits.

We need to ensure that there is much closer collaboration between further education colleges and universities, because further education can play a major role in promoting degree apprenticeships—my two favourite words in the English language. Part of the £2.5 billion skills fund should be spent on covering training costs for small and medium-sized businesses taking on young apprentices.

Finally, it would be very special to see institutes of technology across our landscape. We have done this before, with national colleges and other schemes. I urge the Minister to ensure that they are properly integrated into further education, and that they are further education institutes of technology, not just some brand new shiny buildings. Why not help them to build the prestige of further education?

4.49 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing the debate. I stood up in this Chamber many times during the last Parliament to support our further education colleges. I am a proud champion of the foremost further education provider in my constituency, Bath College. Today, I am even prouder to let the Chamber know about a very good initiative that it has brought together in the last six months.

When covid hit in March, our education leaders were quick off the mark. They saw the enormous scale of the economic fall out of the pandemic on our city and region and took bold, innovative action to address it together. Bath College is versatile and forward looking, and it has forged strong links with local businesses and our two universities, particularly Bath Spa University. Laurel Penrose, chief executive of Bath College, and Professor Sue Rigby, vice-chancellor of Bath Spa University, have worked alongside their teams to create a ground-breaking plan to help reskill and upskill our workforce, bringing together Bath College, Bath Spa University and the Institute of Coding. The project, called I-START, will deliver across innovation, science, technology, arts, research and teaching. Participants will be able to hop on

and off flexible, blended modules, to more easily fit learning around their lives. This will be truly unique to Bath.

Businesses have reiterated the need for resilience, problem solving, creativity and communication, and building on those skills is at the core of the project. As a direct response to covid, the partnership has co-designed an exciting pilot for a skills and social inclusion element of the project, called “Restart”, which will begin next week. It is based on contributions from local employers and businesses on the skillsets they look for when hiring people. I urge the Minister to look at what has been done in Bath and the courses starting as we speak.

Innovation like that is utterly necessary, but it needs the Government to recognise the value of colleges. For far too long, further education colleges that have been relegated to a lower division in our education hierarchy—Cinderella status, if I may say so. There has been a 7% real-terms decrease in funding per learner aged 16 to 19 since 2013. Our excellent Bath College has not received the funding or the recognition it so deserves. Colleges need streamlined, targeted investment, and overall spending on skills needs to increase ahead of inflation. Higher technical education colleges teach economically valuable skills and must be a focal point of the national skills fund. I also urge the Department for Education to work closely on colleges with the Department for Work and Pensions, to ensure that adults who lose their jobs can train and retrain in the second stage of the kickstart programme.

Simply repeating what we have done before will lead to the same outcomes. Colleges are well placed to deliver so much more support to people, places and productivity, especially now, as we are coming out—hopefully, at some point—of the covid crisis. This could be an important opportunity. I urge the Government to look again at the funding and to talk to the Treasury. We have been here so many times talking about further education funding, but please look at what has been achieved in Bath. It is a truly exciting project.

4.53 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. May I take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing the debate? It is particularly vital this week, in Love Our Colleges Week. I most certainly love mine.

The role of colleges in a skills-led recovery following covid is vital to our local communities, businesses and young people, but also to older people looking to reskill. Further education colleges have a wealth of experience and knowledge of delivering learning, training and qualifications in their local communities, and they are agile enough to adapt their offering, in terms of skills, to meet the needs of local markets in real time.

In Loughborough, we are looking at a V-shaped recovery, and we are stretching every sinew to achieve that. Loughborough College kindly came forward to lead the charge on the Government-funded kickstart scheme, working with Charnwood Borough Council, the Loughborough business improvement district and Loughborough jobcentre to be one of the first, if not the first, kickstart scheme started in the country. I am thrilled to inform hon. Members that, after only two weeks

in operation, 143 job opportunities have been identified, and we are working on more.

The team that usually manages apprenticeships is managing the kickstart scheme, using its skills and working with the jobcentre to bring forward the young people to fill the posts. As part of the town deal, funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the town deal board—I declare that I am a member—in conjunction with Loughborough College and Loughborough University, has allocated money to set up a careers and skills hub in the centre of Loughborough, to attract those who would not normally venture on to campus, so that they can see what qualifications and training are available and can take up those opportunities. All of this is in addition to the great work the colleges have been doing in the local community for years, in developing skills and delivering outstanding teaching and learning that supports young people and the local economy.

T-level qualifications are of huge importance to the future of our country and our industries. We should support the development of technical training and development for younger people to meet the skills gap. These two-year courses—a combination of coursework and on-the-job training—create the ideal opportunity for people to earn and learn. Linked with the lifetime skills guarantee for older people without higher level qualifications, colleges can be the conduit to greater earning potential and demand-led teaching and learning.

Social mobility is best accessed by good qualifications and training, and never more so than when the skills that are acquired meet the local needs of industry. These businesses pay for the skills and the workforce they need. As a country, we have come to realise during the covid pandemic the gaps in skills and knowledge we have. Colleges give us the opportunity at a local level to tap into the manpower available and deliver the skills we need. Colleges are a jewel in the crown of any local community, and Loughborough College most certainly is in mine.

4.56 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for bringing forward the debate and enabling us all to put on the record our huge appreciation for our local colleges, such as York College and Askham Bryan College in my city.

We have heard much about the green new deal—York is trying to make it a real deal through the BioYorkshire initiative. From the outset of my contribution, I ask the Minister to give serious consideration to bringing this project forward, because last year the unemployment rate in York was 2.8%, and next year it is predicted to be as high as 27%. We need a bridge now, and that is what our colleges can provide.

York is set to be part of the devolution deal for North Yorkshire, and BioYorkshire is hardwired into that. However, that will not happen until 2023. We need to bring forward the BioYorkshire initiative to commence this year or next. It would be a significant win, not least for my community, which is on the precipice of a tragic level of unemployment.

BioYorkshire will put York at the heart of biosciences not only in the UK, but possibly in the world, in the

race against climate change. It has been put together by a consortium of our two colleges, York St John University, the University of York, Fera Science and many other partners. Through this partnership and innovation, the BioYorkshire proposal will seek to create skills and jobs, and to attract investment. The vision of BioYorkshire is to bring together biotechnology, the natural environment, farming and food production, and the circular economy for a platform here in York and North Yorkshire that will become the UK's centre of innovation and the bioeconomy.

We will create the nation's first carbon-negative region, and deliver profitable and sustainable technologies to transform the region and help kickstart the UK's economy with high skills and high growth following covid-19. BioYorkshire has shown the power of FE and HE working together by creating a BioYorkshire innovation centre, BioYorkshire district hubs and a BioYorkshire accelerator.

We are looking to BioYorkshire for a skills-based recovery by training for change, resilience and enterprise; driving innovation; and upskilling local talent. This will result in new spin-offs and start-ups, and the mentoring of a new generation of entrepreneurs. The bioeconomy skills academy will run across the three core institutions that offer training and education, co-developed with business, from post-16 T-levels and apprenticeships, through to postgraduate courses and continuous professional development.

The impact will be astounding. Establishing this world-leading science centre will create high-value intellectual property. With the global bioeconomy institute and the circular economy data hub, it will support 800 start-ups and spin-offs, innovate with 1,200 businesses and create 4,000 jobs in York, Yorkshire and beyond. It will cut CO₂ emissions by 2,800 kilotons a year and reduce waste to landfill by 1,200 kilotons a year. In a decade, it will generate £5 billion in gross value added. We will attract £1.3 billion in capital investment and, through higher level skills training, we will train 25,000 individuals. We need to start this project now, and I trust that the Minister will back this proposal.

5 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for obtaining this important debate.

Further education is hugely important not only for the economy and for the levelling-up agenda post-covid, but for the long term. Skills and education are the key to the long-term shift if we are to truly bring some of the most disadvantaged parts of our country up into line with everyone else and give people the opportunities they need and deserve. My hon. Friend the Minister is ably leading some hugely positive work in the Department for Education right now, including shifting the dial around further and higher education and the balance of what we advocate for our young people—where we push them in terms of education.

We know that HE outcomes are not as good as we would hope in many cases. There is a huge opportunity through further education and technical and vocational skills to advance and to get better qualifications and earning power at the end of it all than many young people get from HE. That includes the new T-levels and

[Ben Bradley]

the better access to apprenticeships for SMEs that was in the recent lifelong learning announcement. That plan also includes the level 3 entitlement for adults. For communities like mine in Mansfield, where a huge proportion of adults do not have level 3 qualifications, that will give them the right to go back, for free and funded by the Government, and access skills and retraining that will help them get a better job or get back into work post coronavirus. The lifelong learning loans element will help adults to access higher levels of qualifications if they wish. That is hugely important.

It is very welcome that West Notts College in my constituency has had its first capital funding for a very long time. That has gone down very well. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney rightly pointed out the connection between the wider regeneration piece—town deals—and the skills and retraining agenda. We hope Mansfield will invest some of its town deal money in things like student accommodation, new skills and retraining commitments, and new premises to supplement the work being done by Nottingham Trent University and West Notts College in partnership, which is bringing better FE, better technical qualifications and HE degree qualifications to Mansfield so that young people can access them on their doorstep. That is all hugely positive for the future.

The Government are doing good work in this space and we can add to that post-coronavirus things such as the kickstart scheme and additional funding to support apprenticeships and promote those opportunities to business. There is some really good stuff, and it is key to the regeneration piece, to levelling up our country and to supporting communities like Mansfield.

The Secretary of State is bang on when he says that FE needs that boost and to provide an equal level of opportunity to the HE sector, into which young people are so often pushed whether or not it is the right thing. We need to make the case from this place, from Government and from business that FE presents a huge opportunity for young people to get into work and to get the skills and help they need for good employment opportunities.

My ask for the Government is to work with good college leaders on local priorities. I keep raising the example of West Notts College and its work with Nottingham Trent University, which is a really positive example of what could be done elsewhere. It would be great to have the Minister along, as we have discussed before, to see that when it is possible.

We need to look at the apprenticeship levy. We have made it easier for SMEs to access that funding to bring apprenticeships into smaller businesses. The regular feedback on the levy is that it is complicated and that businesses need help to access that money.

On age, I have never understood why we think FE and technical and vocational skills are so brilliant post-16, but are so averse to letting 15 or 14-year-olds have a go at these subjects. That would be really positive and help a lot of the most disadvantaged young people who are disaffected at school to find a reason to stay in education. There is some really good stuff happening in this space and I thank the Minister for all the work she is doing. I look forward to working with her in future.

5.4 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for obtaining this debate on this important topic, especially in Colleges Week.

I particularly thank Derwentside College in my constituency, which I have visited many times. It is truly excellent at working with local employers across the piece. This has been a particularly challenging time for people in my constituency.

The announcements over the past few months on the Government's work in this area have been welcome. The huge lifelong learning announcement will be transformational, particularly for adult learning and FE, and the kickstart scheme is helping to drive the apprenticeships that we need locally. My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) mentioned levelling up, and to me that is exactly what the FE agenda is all about—putting some meat on the bones of that and providing a transformation opportunity in people's lives.

I hope that, as the Chair of the Education Committee said, we are entering a golden age for the sector; I know that the Minister gets it, I know that the Secretary of State gets it and, having spoken to the Chancellor, I think that he gets it as well. However, if we are to drive productivity and opportunity for people across our communities, FE will be crucial.

As hon. Members across the Chamber have mentioned, we cannot debate on FE on its own, without mentioning the relationships with higher education and business. I, too, welcome the Government's direction of travel, particularly in the relationship with HE and in not constantly driving people on to courses that are perhaps not best suited to them, just to hit a statistic. We should be driving people on to courses that they want to do and that best enhance their life opportunities. I welcome the broader direction of travel towards collaboration. I chaired the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships call today, and it was great to see some of the work that colleges are doing with universities, helping with degree-level apprenticeships.

However, this is not just about 16 to 18-year-olds; we face a difficult time as a country and we are going to see a large number of people looking to retrain and reskill, so it is important that we look after the FE sector and lean into it, to let it do what it does best. Part of that will be about upskilling people to levels 4, 5 and 6, but not taking them out of their communities. We should provide those opportunities as locally as possible, so that people can train part-time or in the evening and improve their skillsets while they are in work.

Finally, I ask the Minister to keep highlighting excellence in the sector and, therefore, to visit Derwentside College in my constituency when she gets the opportunity.

5.7 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, as always, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing the opportunity to highlight important issues in respect of colleges.

I am not going to repeat what others have said. My constituents are very fortunate in that they are served, following the area review, by the merged institution created from Harrow College and Uxbridge College—

two of the highest-performing colleges in London. Having been engaged with those colleges for many years, I would like to highlight one strength of the sector that is especially relevant to all of us and the different local economic circumstances that our constituents face: the amazing flexibility that colleges have shown in tailoring their offer to the opportunities that exist in the area for young people.

I am fortunate to represent a constituency that is part of a wider west London economic community in which we have a particularly vibrant tech hub. The video assistant referee systems that support high-level football are located at Stockley Park—I see wry smiles from the football fans in the room—as are a number of the companies that programme some of the world's most popular computer games. There is a nexus of opportunity for young people—not necessarily those who will be pushed by their schools into the traditional A-level academic route—to gain access to well-paid, prestigious jobs in a desirable working environment close to their home area.

I am impressed by the efforts the local college has made to link up young people who are studying and pursuing those topics with those businesses and to ensure that they are able to access those opportunities and find their way into those very good, highly-paid jobs in an internationally competitive environment. That can lead to people doing amazing things with their lives, from what to many people, when they first look at the prospect of college, perhaps seems a less promising beginning than going down a route that ultimately leads to university. The more we can publicise those opportunities in Colleges Week, the better, because the more our constituents—particularly the mums and dads—understand that that route of opportunity is open to young people, the better it will be.

I will finish by touching on finance. Quite a few Members have made the point that, compared with the schools sector, colleges often feel a bit like a Cinderella service. When we simply look at the money, that is a fact, but we also know that we can sometimes do great things on a relatively modest budget. I think colleges deserve praise for that. I do not simply say that the answer is to make sure that more money and resources go to vocational education, although that would be welcome; we should recognise that these are institutions that demonstrate that they can create fantastic opportunities for young people that are not driven simply by the Government spending more and more money.

The more that we can extend that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) alluded to, to a wider age group in this country, the better. I agree we need to look at young people, such as those who might have considered the technology college route in the past, but what about those slightly older people, who may be looking to get their lives back on track with further education later on? This could be exactly the opportunity they require.

I hope that those points provide a summary, but I also place on the record my thanks to the Harrow College and Uxbridge College principals, who have done such a fantastic job for my constituents over the years.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We have only two minutes before the wind-ups. I dropped the hon. Member for Warrington South down the list for the simple reason that he arrived well after the start of the debate.

5.11 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this debate.

We are, as the Chair of the Education Committee said, in a golden age for further education—that is good, because we need to be, due to the pressure we have on skills and the need to address the skills gap in this country. A lot of colleagues have talked about the work that FE colleges are doing. I want to go in a different direction and talk about the reason they are doing it. The reason is that business needs them to be doing it. The adoption of automation, new technology and artificial intelligence—the digital age we are living in—is unleashing profound structural shifts in the UK workforce. As a result, we have to change the way that we operate our skills.

UK companies need to respond to these threats. If they fail to meet this challenge, they will find themselves with even more acute shortages of talent. Worryingly, the CBI estimates that as many as nine in 10 people currently in work will need to be retrained or reskilled over the next 10 years, partly as a consequence of that new digital revolution. Therefore, hearing the Prime Minister announce that we will be moving to a system where every student will have a flexible lifelong learning entitlement of four years of post-18 education is very welcome, because that is what we will need. Bridging the gap between further and higher education, and increasing flexibility in the funding system to support adults to train—and retrain—and upskill throughout their working lives is absolutely pivotal.

I want to touch briefly on T-levels, which are now being taught in my local college. Priestley College in Warrington became one of the first colleges in the country to offer T-levels. I met the principal recently, and the successful launch of the T-levels in digital production, design and development and in education and childcare has gone incredibly well. I hope the Minister will join me in commending the work of Priestley College, which has not only reopened in extremely challenging circumstances, but made a fantastic start to teaching T-levels in the north of England.

5.13 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing the debate. He is a powerful advocate for our colleges as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for further education and lifelong learning. It is clear that all contributors recognise the crucial role our colleges play. Many took the opportunity to specifically thank and acknowledge the work of their local colleges, and I have no doubt that all those contributions about the role of our colleges were genuinely felt.

As I know from my regular visits to Chesterfield College, our colleges are the providers of second chances. They are the home of about 30% of all apprenticeship learning and the focal point for our skills strategy. For so many, they are the road between school failure and academic and career success, and they have changed the life chances of people in my family. They are fundamental to our country having the skills it needs to cope with the twin threats to our economy of covid-19 and Brexit.

[Mr Toby Perkins]

We have heard during this debate a familiar refrain: that our colleges have been ignored too long by successive Governments, and that they must finally be taken seriously. However, I somewhat take issue with that lazy characterisation, and with the suggestion that recent announcements by this Government constitute some kind of golden age of FE. In welcoming the campaigning zeal of the hon. Member for Waveney I also want to ensure that the record of this Government is properly put under the spotlight, because it is not a case of “it was ever thus”.

As was revealed by my recent written question, £2.61 billion was invested in further education capital expenditure in the final five years of the previous Labour Government. In the following five years, the Government reduced that spending in actual terms by a shocking 64%. In all, colleges have endured a decade of cuts amounting to a third of their budget, while attempting to continue to be at the forefront of equipping young people and adults in every area of the country with the skills they need to succeed. What is more, we have seen adult education funding slashed by 50% in real terms and appalling failure on careers guidance, and the Government announcement just this week that they were scrapping their “Get Help to Retrain” initiative—the centrepiece of the national retraining scheme—less than three years after it was announced should give us all pause for thought.

As we enter this period in which we are asked to believe that the Government have finally accepted the need for a skills-based economy, we do so in the shadow of the vindictive and destructive announcement that they are scrapping funding for the Unionlearn programme that their own assessment was so complimentary about. That is perhaps more revealing than 1,000 press releases. At the same time, we know that, just a few months ago, the Government sent £300 million of apprenticeship levy funds back to the Treasury. There is far more generous funding for the commitment-free kickstart programme than for apprenticeships, and the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) was absolutely right to say that SMEs are shut out of our apprenticeships far too often. The Association of Colleges has stated that colleges face a shortfall of £2 billion this academic year.

There is so much more to say about our further education sector, but unfortunately there is not the time in which to do it, so I will close with this: we need a Government that recognise that colleges are a fundamental part of our skills and economic ecosystem and that do not pit them against universities or even see them as opponents of the independent provider sector, but that see them working collaboratively across the piece. We need a Government that introduce policy based on evidence and then give policies a chance to work. We need a Government that are honest about the fact that the scale of funding cuts means that the current investment is a tiny step back up the mountain.

We need a properly resourced Department for Education that sees FE colleges working collaboratively with employers, universities, trade unions and Government schemes, and we need a Government who recognise that not all people can get careers advice from their father's friends at the golf club. We need a skills system that works around real people's lives and supports them to

retrain without their families going hungry while they are doing so. Colleges are capable of playing the role we need them to, but not unless the Government show the humility and resolve to recognise where those colleges are starting from and what is required to help them back to the place they should be in: at the heart of a skills system relied on by employers, valued by learners and every bit as good as the very best in the world.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Minister, you have 10 minutes, in order to give the mover a brief opportunity to wind up.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on having secured this important debate during this Colleges Week. I am sure we are all delighted to be back in Westminster Hall, and I cannot think of a better and more important topic than the role of FE colleges in our vital skills-led recovery from covid-19. I genuinely thank all hon. Members who are here today for their support for FE colleges and technical education. I know that they all love our colleges, so I thank them all for their contributions.

FE colleges and providers have never been as important as they are now. For some of us, they have been important for a long time—I attended mine 35 years ago—but they are going to become so vital for so many people up and down the country, many of whom will face changed circumstances. Their prospects will change in such a short period of time, which is highly unusual. The colleges have responded brilliantly during the crisis, and are continuing to do so as we look towards recovery, and I place on record my huge thanks to the sector. Every week I have heard how colleges are supporting not just their learners and vulnerable students, but the wider community. They were making scrubs and masks for the NHS, giving food parcels and meals to the most vulnerable, and doing all kinds of fundraising events. The stories that I hear from FE colleges are truly amazing.

Before covid-19 struck, longer-term reforms to the school system were already under way. For generation after generation, technical education has been undervalued and neglected. That neglect must and will come to an end. I am glad we started our technical education reforms when we did, because they are going to be important to the recovery, boosting productivity and offering young people a real choice of high-quality training and pathways to successful careers that are equal in esteem to traditional academic routes.

It will not have escaped anyone that the world has gone digital and that we are living through a technological revolution. Indeed, my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington South (Andy Carter), for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and for North West Durham (Mr Holden) pointed out how important that is. It is a key pillar to levelling up and providing opportunity for all in the towns that will need support to recover from coronavirus and that have felt neglected for many years.

It is fantastic and timely to see that colleges and other providers have begun the roll-out of T-levels for 16 to 19-year-olds. A number of Members mentioned their

support for them, and I was delighted to hear it. They represent the biggest reform of post-16 education since A-levels were first introduced 70 years ago. They are attracting investment of £500 million each year, once they are fully rolled out. The introduction of these new, pioneering qualifications was challenging during the pandemic, so I thank all 44 providers who battled through to deliver them during very challenging times—they were too important to delay. We have waited a long time to put this bedrock for our technical education in place, working with employers and employer-led standards to ensure that we invest in the right areas and the right things.

We are also investing up to £290 million of capital funding to establish 20 institutes of technology across every region in England. I reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) that these will be a pinnacle of technical education and training. They are unique collaborations between colleges, universities and businesses, and they will offer high-quality technical education and training in key economic sectors, such as digital, construction, advanced manufacturing and engineering. The first 12 institutes are being rolled out, and the competition for the next wave was launched on 8 October. The opportunity for innovative, high-tech proposals to come forward is now there. The Department for Education very much welcomes any new proposals for the second wave of the institutes of technology.

We need to increase the take-up of higher level qualifications—levels 4, 5 and 6—as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham. These higher technical qualifications are key and give people of all ages the opportunity to develop a prestigious high-quality, high-technical route, if that is right for them. The Prime Minister has been clear on supporting that choice. Getting a loan for a high-value technical course should be as easy as getting one for a degree, whether it is taught in an FE college or a university. A new funding system will open up new alternatives, ensure that further education colleges and providers have the same access to funding that universities do, and “remove the bias”, as the Prime Minister put it, that propels young people into universities and away from technical education.

Technical education is part of the lifetime skills guarantee announced at the end of last month. We are already engaging with colleges on some of the measures to be delivered from April next year, particularly the first level 3 funding for adults. That will give adults who missed out on that opportunity the chance to pursue it, by fully funding their first full level 3. It will focus on valuable courses that will help them in the labour market. We will be supporting providers to develop more level 3 provision. We will encourage them to do so, and we will monitor the demand from adults closely.

One important aspect of our recovery is supporting the most disadvantaged. Further education colleges do a lot to provide opportunities and social mobility for the most disadvantaged in our society. We have already been investing in that. Some 20% of learners in FE have some learning difficulty and disability.

Robert Halfon: I thank the Minister for her important speech. One of the biggest problems in encouraging people to do FE and skills is the lack of proper careers advice promoting apprenticeships and skills in schools.

Despite the Baker clause, which was meant to change that, not a lot has changed. What are her plans to ensure that schools encourage skills, apprenticeships and further education and give FE an equality of prestige with university?

Gillian Keegan: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. I actually had a meeting about this long-standing problem just before I came here, because careers is a key pillar of our FE and skills White Paper to ensure that everyone understands the routes. The Careers & Enterprise Company has done a lot of work to ensure that young people get a broad range of opportunities to talk to businesses, look at career opportunities and visit colleges and universities, but not everyone gets all of the information they need to make an informed decision.

Hon. Members will all be aware of the skills recovery package and the Chancellor’s plan for jobs. There is a lot of investment in apprenticeships, traineeships and classroom-based study. We are also extending the National Careers Service and putting in an extra £32 million to provide additional careers support.

FE providers have always been key to delivering adult education as well. Therefore, as we develop our plans for reskilling adults, that will include an extra £2.5 billion over the course of the Parliament for the national skills fund. Contrary to what was said by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), the national retraining scheme has not been scrapped; it will be built on and become part of the much bigger national skills fund. The national retraining scheme had £100 million; it will be £2.5 billion for the national skills fund.

Mr Perkins: Will the Minister confirm whether the “Get Help to Retrain” scheme has been scrapped?

Gillian Keegan: The “Get Help to Retrain” scheme was a pilot website in six areas, and all the learnings from those pilots will be brought into the new national skills fund. It will be called something else, but the learnings will not be lost. Digital bootcamps are also a new addition, which I am sure many hon. Members will welcome.

These policies are all part of a wider rebalancing between HE and FE, making FE a more attractive choice. However, we are not leaving out the basics. We mentioned capital programme funding, much of which in the past went via the local enterprise partnerships, and it was not always ring-fenced, which led to shortages in some areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney raised some interesting ideas including business centres and focused areas of investment. There will be much discussion between colleges, the Association of Colleges, business groups and the Government to address those issues. We are listening to ideas about how to strengthen the sector, and we will publish a White Paper in the near future.

There has never been a more important time for this. We are facing significant skills shortages in key sectors, including construction and engineering, as mentioned by my hon. Friend, but there are many others. Until recently, we also had low levels of unemployment. However, the prospect of dire levels of unemployment means that now is the time to ensure that we invest in our FE sector and build back better as a nation.

5.28 pm

Peter Aldous: This has been a wide-ranging debate; we have covered a lot in an hour. I will quickly highlight some points raised. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) mentioned that colleges are the greatest tool in combating poverty. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), the Chair of the Education Committee, made the social justice case for a pupil premium for disadvantaged pupils. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) showed how her college is deeply embedded in her community. My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) highlighted how her college is getting involved in kickstart. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) showed collaborative working on the BioYorkshire initiative. My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) highlighted

the problems with the apprenticeship levy for SMEs. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) highlighted the role here for levelling up. My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) talked about the global expertise coming from his colleges, and my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) highlighted the opportunities and challenges of the digital age.

The clock is ticking. For a few seconds, let us suppose that that clock is ticking to midnight. Let us make sure that Cinderella really does disappear this time, that this is no longer the Cinderella part of education, and that we will not need VAR to determine that that is the case.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No.10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 20 October 2020

CABINET OFFICE

Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee Meeting

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee met on 19 October 2020 in London, with delegations attending in person and by video conference.

The meeting was co-chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and European Commission Vice President, Maroš Šefčovič, and attended by the alternate Joint Committee co-chairs; the First Minister and deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive; and member state representatives.

The Committee undertook a stocktake of specialised Committee activity since the last meeting on 28 September. The Committee also updated on implementation of the withdrawal agreement, with particular focus on the Northern Ireland protocol and citizens' rights.

The UK reiterated their commitment to upholding obligations under the withdrawal agreement and protecting the Belfast (Good Friday) agreement in all respects. The UK further emphasised commitment to EU citizens in the UK and UK nationals in the EU, ensuring they have their rights under the withdrawal agreement protected.

The Committee adopted the citizens' rights joint report on residency and agreed to its publication.

The UK reiterated its commitment to implementing the protocol in full so the people of Northern Ireland can be given the fundamental legal assurances they need, and will not face the damaging prospect of the unmitigated defaults of the protocol under any circumstances.

The Committee considered the remaining WAJC tasks during the rest of the transition period.

The UK took the opportunity provided by this meeting to underline its commitment to continued constructive engagement with the EU through Joint Committee processes.

[HCWS525]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Pandemic Preparedness Exercise: Report

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Today, I am publishing the report into Exercise Cygnus.

Exercise Cygnus was a national exercise that took place in 2016. It looked at how well prepared the UK was to respond to a serious flu pandemic. The aim was to test systems to the extreme, to identify strengths and weaknesses in the UK's response plans, which would then inform improvements in our resilience.

The Department of Health and Social Care (known as the Department of Health at the time) 12 other Government Departments, NHS England, Public Health

England, local public services, several prisons, and staff from the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Governments took part in the exercise. Overall, it involved more than 950 people and culminated in a three-day national level tier 1 exercise in October 2016.

Exercise Cygnus was not designed to consider other potential pandemics, or to identify what action could be taken to prevent widespread transmission.

The report was commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care and produced independently by Public Health England.

The Government accepted all 22 recommendations from the report and have acted on each to improve pandemic response plans. For example, developing a free-standing Pandemic Influenza Bill. This meant the Government were ready with legislative proposals that could rapidly be tailored to form the basis of what became the Coronavirus Act 2020.

Many of these workstreams have provided a good foundation during the current covid-19 pandemic, helping speed up our response and save lives. I will deposit copies of the report in the Libraries of both Houses and it will be available on gov.uk.

[HCWS526]

JUSTICE

Parole Reform

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Lucy Frazer): Protecting the public from harm is the first duty of any Government. The parole system is one of the key mechanisms for keeping the public safe by ensuring that dangerous criminals are not released when they still pose a danger to the public. As such, it is essential that this system is as robust, effective and transparent as possible. The Government are determined to address fully the transparency and confidence issues highlighted by the John Worboys case, and also to make proactive improvements to the way that the end-to-end parole system works. We want to ensure that the public are not only properly protected by a robust and effective system for assessing the risks presented by the most serious offenders, but also that they understand and have confidence in that process and the decisions taken.

Over the last two years, we have worked hard to improve the public understanding and confidence in the Parole Board. Today, I am pleased to launch a root-and-branch review of the parole system, as committed to in our manifesto. Moving beyond looking solely at the Parole Board itself, this review will ensure that the entire system delivers in the most effective way possible its primary function of keeping the public safe by releasing offenders only when it is safe to do so.

This root-and-branch review will be concluded by summer 2021, by which point a final report will be published summarising the findings and next steps. Terms of reference have today been published online, explaining that it will consider:

- the effectiveness of the reforms we have implemented since 2018;
- whether the Parole Board for England and Wales, as currently constituted, remains the most effective model for making independent judicial decisions about the continued detention of prisoners;
- how best to improve the public's understanding and confidence in the parole system;

and measures to further improve the openness and transparency of the parole process.

In support of this, I am today launching a public consultation—the first step in our review—that will explore options for increasing the transparency of the parole system. The consultation seeks views on the possibility of allowing victims to observe parole hearings and on whether the media and wider public should also be given greater access to hearings where it is appropriate to do so. The consultation will be open until 1 December 2020, and I anticipate publishing our response before the end of the year.

The root-and-branch review will build upon the programme of reform, already delivered last year, which amended the Parole Board rules to increase transparency, and to improve the way victims are engaged with. For example, we now have a system where victims and others are provided with summaries explaining the reasons for the Parole Board's decisions, and a new reconsideration mechanism which allows applications to be made for decisions to be looked at again if they are thought to be legally flawed.

Concurrently, the tailored review of the Parole Board has been under way, the outcome of which is also being published today. The tailored review was undertaken in accordance with the Cabinet Office requirement that all public bodies are reviewed at least once each Parliament. This review focused predominantly on operational changes within the current legislative framework, making recommendations to further improve collaboration within the parole system to ensure that cases progress in a timely manner, and highlighted existing legal powers that the Parole Board can use to compel the production of evidence and the attendance of witnesses. I commend the recommendations to the board, which have the potential once implemented to bring real improvements to the parole system.

Together with the significant reforms we set out in the sentencing White Paper on 16 September, I am confident that the measures outlined above and the wider examination of the parole system we are now launching, will continue to keep the public safe, as well as ensure that the most serious offenders spend time in prison that properly reflects the gravity of their crimes.

[HCWS527]

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Covid-19 Vaccine

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): Today, I am announcing new initiatives the vaccine taskforce has invested in to ensure that a successful covid-19 vaccine is available as soon as possible.

I can inform the House that we are establishing human challenge trials for possible covid-19 vaccines in the UK.

In human challenge studies, the vaccine is given to a small number of healthy adult volunteers, who are then exposed to the virus. Medics and scientists then closely monitor the effect to see exactly how the vaccine works and identify any side effects. These studies are conducted under strict health and safety conditions—the safety of all volunteers is paramount.

The first stage of this project will be delivered by a partnership between Imperial College London, the Royal Free London Hospital's specialist and secure research unit in London and industry-leading clinical company hVIVO, which has pioneered viral human challenge models. The aim will be to discover the smallest amount of virus it takes to cause a person to develop covid-19. This is known as a virus characterisation study and will be backed by £33.6 million of Government investment. If approved by regulators and the ethics committee, the studies would start in January with results expected by May 2021.

I can also announce that the Government are investing £19.7 million in Public Health England (PHE) to expand their state-of-the-art laboratories at Porton Down.

This will allow PHE to run crucial tests on blood samples taken from participants of the covid-19 vaccine clinical trials to monitor the effectiveness of the vaccines. These tests are essential in supporting the development and regulatory approval of vaccine candidates. Scientists at PHE's laboratory in Porton Down have been working on developing this testing capability since the start of the pandemic. The investment in these world-leading facilities and expertise will enable scientists to provide critical testing support for vaccine trials taking place in the UK. It will also ensure that the UK has access to a centralised laboratory to test the samples. This will give us a greater understanding of how potential vaccines work and compare against one another.

The funding announced today for these ground-breaking studies marks an important next step in building on our understanding of the virus and accelerating the development of our most promising vaccines.

[HCWS528]

Energy Tariff Cap: Effective Competition Decision

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): I am today announcing that the price cap on standard variable and default energy tariffs will remain in place for 2021.

The independent energy regulator, Ofgem, has carried out an assessment into whether the conditions are in place for effective competition in domestic supply contracts. Ofgem have been transparent in how they made their assessment. As required by the legislation, Ofgem have made a recommendation as to whether the price cap should be extended. The Government value the expertise and insight of Ofgem, and I have considered that report and recommendation in reaching my decision.

As set out in the relevant legislation, the price cap can be extended for a year at a time up to the end of 2023 at the latest.

While there have been some improvements across the market in recent years, such as increased consumer engagement, rising switching levels and progress with the smart meter rollout, there is still more to do to ensure consumers will not face unfair prices in its absence.

More than half of energy consumers are still on standard variable or default tariffs, where in the absence of the cap they would likely be paying excessive charges for their energy use.

Extending the cap means that 11 million households will continue to be protected from overcharging in the energy market. The cap will continue to safeguard these consumers, while other initiatives such as faster switching,

the smart meter rollout and consumer engagement programs continue to contribute to a more competitive market.

[HCWS524]

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