

**Wednesday
11 November 2020**

**Volume 683
No. 133**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 11 November 2020

Armistice Day

Wednesday 11 November 2020

10.58 am

[Prayers were said by the Chaplain of the Speaker (Rev. Tricia Hillas).]

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Approaching the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, I invite you to rise and be still to remember those who have died for their country in war.

In doing so we commit ourselves to work in penitence and faith for reconciliation between the nations, that all people may, together, live in freedom, justice and peace.

We pray for all who in bereavement, disability and pain continue to suffer the consequences of fighting and terror.

We remember with thanksgiving and sorrow those whose lives, in world wars and conflicts past and present, have been given and taken away.

Almighty and eternal God, from whose love we cannot be parted, either by death or life: hear our prayers and thanksgivings for all whom we remember this day; fulfil in them the purpose of your love; and bring us all, with them, to your eternal joy. Amen.

Mr Speaker: They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them.

Hon. Members: We will remember them.

11 am

The House observed a two-minute silence.

11.2 am

[Chaplain of the Speaker]

Ever-living God, we remember those whom you have gathered from the storm of war into the peace of your presence; may that same peace calm our fears, bring justice to all peoples and establish harmony among the nations. Amen.

God grant to the living grace, to the departed rest, to the Church, the Queen, the Commonwealth and all people, unity, peace and concord, and to us and all God's servants, life everlasting; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. Amen.

House of Commons

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.]

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Act 2020

Agriculture Act 2020.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the extension of the coronavirus job retention scheme in Scotland. [908449]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): Today, on the 11th day of the 11th month, I am sure the whole House will join me in remembering those who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to our country.

I have regular discussions with my Cabinet colleagues on all aspects of how we support the entire country, including Scotland, through the covid crisis. The coronavirus job retention scheme has always been a UK-wide scheme, and it has now been extended until the end of March 2021, with employees across the UK receiving 80% of their current salary for hours not worked.

Hannah Bardell: May I associate myself and those on the SNP Benches with the comments of the Secretary of State?

At the last Scottish questions, my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) raised a very serious concern about levels of poverty when the job retention scheme ended. The Minister at the Dispatch Box said that November would be the right time to look at a targeted scheme, as if he had some magical powers of poverty prediction. Imagine our surprise, Mr Speaker, when the south of England went into full lockdown and the full force of furlough came back into force. Will the Secretary of State clarify whether the notion of “targeted” is really targeted at the south of England, with a huge disrespect to Scotland and the rest of the devolved nations?

Mr Jack: Absolutely not. The Prime Minister was clear from the get-go, following Cabinet on the Saturday when we discussed the new economic situation in England,

that it was a UK-wide scheme. It is 80% for the whole of the United Kingdom. It is a simple scheme and it is for our whole country and he has been absolutely clear about that from the start.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The UK Treasury has provided an up-front guarantee of £8.2 billion to the Scottish Government to help protect jobs and to help the Scottish Government tackle coronavirus, yet we are still to hear from the Scottish Government about where more than £2 billion of that funding is to be spent. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Scottish Government need to provide details urgently about how they will use that funding to support Scots?

Mr Jack: I agree with my hon. Friend. There has been substantial extra funding, guaranteed funding, to the Scottish Government—£8.2 billion, as he correctly identified. That is money received through the Barnett formula. The Scottish Government must not shirk their responsibility to be open and transparent about how that money is being spent. We need accountability so that the people of Scotland can judge whether it is being spent wisely.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP) [V]: The Minister has recently said that the job retention scheme will last into next year, but he has also said that there will be no referendums on Scotland's future for a generation. The Edinburgh agreement, signed by a Tory Prime Minister, provided the legal framework for the 2014 referendum, so can the Minister tell where it says in that agreement that there cannot be another referendum?

Mr Jack: I commend the hon. Lady for trying to get a referendum into questions about the job retention scheme. While we are all fighting this pandemic and trying to secure and support people's jobs, it beggars belief that the SNP carries on talking about independence referendums and about separation. I find it really quite disappointing. The answer to her question is that it was mentioned many times in the White Paper that the SNP Government produced in advance of that referendum. The words "once in a generation" were mentioned on a number of pages.

Mhairi Black: I thank the Minister for confirming that there is no legal basis for his assertion on the timing of a future referendum. Given that it was also agreed cross-party that nothing in the Smith commission prevents Scotland from becoming an independent country in the future, can he tell us whose decision is it whether Scotland has another referendum?

Mr Speaker: Order. The question must have some relevance. The first question got through, but you were trying to push your luck the second time. We cannot do that. The question must be relevant. Sorry about that. We had better move on.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) [V]: The extension of the furlough scheme demonstrated again how the UK Government continue to support jobs in all four nations of the United Kingdom, and we need that support and joint working to continue following the positive news about a potential covid-19 vaccine. Will the Secretary of State outline the work done between the Scottish

Government and the UK Government to ensure that there is a seamless roll-out of this vaccine that has given us so much hope here in Scotland and across the UK?

Mr Jack: We have invested more than £230 million in manufacturing any successful vaccine. The vaccines have been procured and paid for by the UK Government on behalf of everyone in the United Kingdom. Doses will be distributed fairly and across all parts of the United Kingdom according to population share.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): A business operator in my constituency contacted me four days before furlough was supposed to end. He operates two bars in my constituency. As a responsible employer, he had kept on his 44 staff and taken on the debt from bounce back loans, but he was absolutely at the end of his tether with this Government and their last-minute decisions. Will the Secretary of State apologise to that business operator in my constituency for the severe stress that the Government's dithering has caused him and for the distress that it has caused his employees, as well as to the many people who could not keep on their staff or who lost their jobs due to this Government's incompetence?

Mr Jack: The hon. Lady will recognise that this is a dynamic and unprecedented situation, and we have to take decisions as we see what is in front of us. The employers of those who lost their jobs after 23 September, but were in employment and furlough up until 23 September, are allowed to bring those employees back and put them on furlough.

Co-ordinated Response to Covid-19: Devolved Administrations

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): What recent steps he has taken to ensure effective co-operation between the Government and the devolved Administrations. [908450]

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to help ensure co-ordination between Scotland and the other nations of the UK in response to the covid-19 outbreak. [908452]

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to help ensure co-ordination between Scotland and the other nations of the UK in response to the covid-19 outbreak. [908458]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart): An effective response to covid-19 does indeed need to be a co-ordinated response across the UK. On 25 September, the UK Government and the three devolved Administrations published a joint statement on our collective approach to responding to covid-19. There are very regular meetings at both ministerial and official levels.

Mr Speaker: We now go to Allan Dorans in Scotland.

Allan Dorans [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: I think Allan Dorans has been cut off in his prime, so I call Jeff Smith.

Jeff Smith: What is the Minister's understanding of the application of the furlough scheme in Scotland and the other nations of the UK, given that Scotland is operating under a different tier system and different lockdown restrictions?

Iain Stewart: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has not vaporised into thin air. The lockdown scheme extends across the UK and is available whether a part of the UK—or a part of each nation within the UK—is in lockdown or not. It is there for everyone.

Alex Davies-Jones [V]: The Scottish Affairs Committee described a deteriorating relationship between the UK and Scottish Governments on joined-up covid-19 policy making, with the main issue being trust. What work has the Secretary of State undertaken to improve awareness and understanding of devolution among Whitehall officials, so that policy makers have mutual understanding of the impact of decisions on each nation of the UK?

Iain Stewart: The hon. Lady raises an important point. As I said in my initial answer, there are very regular discussions between all Government Departments and devolved Administrations at many levels—be that in Health, Transport or Education. I think that there is a widespread understanding of the need to balance UK-wide interventions with allowing local flexibilities where circumstances dictate.

Mr Speaker: We are going to try to return to Allan Dorans.

Allan Dorans [V]: Will the Minister confirm or deny that taxpayers' money is being used to employ consultants with the sole purpose of producing and promoting negative propaganda to encounter the increasingly successful campaign for Scottish independence? Is that not to the detriment of co-operation between the nations?

Iain Stewart: Forgive me, Mr Speaker, but I am not quite sure what that has got to do with the response to coronavirus.

Mr Speaker: Is there anything that you can answer in that question?

Iain Stewart: No, I do not think that it is relevant to our discussion.

Mr Speaker: In which case, I call the shadow Secretary of State, Ian Murray.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in recognising that it is the 11th day of the 11th month, lest we forget those who gave their lives so that we could live freely today. We will always remember them.

I am disappointed that the Secretary of State did not congratulate President-elect Joe Biden on his wonderful election in America. Given that in a recent

poll 75% of Scots said that they would vote for Joe Biden, they have eventually got the Government they would have voted for.

The announcement this week of a potential covid vaccine is incredibly positive. While it certainly does not mean, of course, that we have reached the end of this crisis, it does perhaps signal some hope for the public. If the vaccine is approved, the country will face an unprecedented logistical challenge. If mass vaccination is to be done successfully, we will need all levels of government working together. However, a poll just yesterday found that two thirds of Scots were dissatisfied that the Scottish and UK Governments do not work together and a majority wanted closer co-operation. Can the Minister inform the House what work the UK and Scottish Governments are undertaking together to build an infrastructure that will be able to distribute and administer any future vaccines to everyone?

Iain Stewart: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question. Referring to his initial comments, I was delighted that President-elect Biden spoke to our Prime Minister ahead of any other European country, contrary to what some of the naysayers in the media were predicting.

The hon. Gentleman's substantial question is a very important one and it illustrates the extent to which the UK Government and the devolved Administrations can and should work together. The vaccine—as he said, we are not quite there yet, but it gives very strong hope—is purchased by the UK Government on behalf of the whole UK. The distribution, the prioritisation, of the vaccine will be a matter for the devolved Administrations. However, we are in regular contact and stand ready to assist with any logistics that will be required to make sure that it is distributed on the basis of clinical priority and not any other needs.

Ian Murray: I appreciate what the Minister said, but I think the public would look on it very unfavourably if both Governments did not work together to ensure that this vaccine is distributed.

But we also must not lose sight of today's challenges. While the Chancellor's latest plan to extend furlough until March is very welcome, there remain millions of people across the UK and in Scotland who have not received any support as lockdowns continue. The 3 million taxpayers excluded from Government support include countless self-employed people, pay-as-you-earn freelancers, and many, many others. It is understandable that there may have been some cracks in hastily designed schemes announced in March, but not to fix those and to continue to exclude millions from any support is inexcusable. I raised this with the Secretary of State in the House on 1 July and 7 October, so, for the third time: will the Scotland Office demand that the Chancellor reconsiders and provides support to those taxpayers left without any help from this Government?

Iain Stewart: The hon. Gentleman's question would have greater potency if furlough were indeed the only scheme that was available, but a wide range of support is available for businesses and individuals across the UK, including bounce back loans, tax deferrals, mortgage holidays and the like. In addition, the Chancellor has provided the Scottish Government with unprecedented levels of support, going up by an additional £1 billion.

It is up to the Scottish Government, if they wish to provide additional support over and above the UK-wide schemes, to ensure that they have the resources to do so.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say that I am very concerned that the question was a substantive question that was within this grouping? The problem is that the grouping is not good, but it was the Government who put the grouping together. So I think the Minister ought to try to see if he could answer the question from Allan Dorans, because it is within that section.

Iain Stewart: If I remember the question correctly, it was, “Are we spending taxpayers’ money on fighting the independence referendum?” My answer to that is that we do not wish another independence referendum. The last thing that the people of Scotland need, and businesses and jobs in Scotland need, is the uncertainty that another independence referendum would create.

Mr Speaker: At least there is an answer, even if it is not the kind I wished.

Voluntary and Community Organisations: Funding

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with Scottish Government Ministers on the adequacy of funding for voluntary and community organisations in Scotland. [908451]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart): I regularly meet Scottish Ministers to discuss matters of importance to Scotland. Funding for the voluntary sector and community organisations in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Government. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the enormous work that charities and voluntary organisations do, in Scotland and the UK, to support our communities through this very challenging period.

Rachael Maskell: Charities and social enterprises have never been more needed across the UK, but may I correct the Minister? The Government put forward a fund of £60 million for charities within the devolved authorities, so I would like to know how much the Scottish charities have received from that fund and what representations he has made for its extension, because charities have never have been in more need.

Iain Stewart: The funding that is given to the Scottish Government does not necessarily have to be used exactly for those purposes. They can supplement that as well out of the general funds that are transferred—the £8.2 billion. I am very happy to look into how that money is being spent, and I refer back to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) made about the questions over how the £2 billion has been spent.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I join the Minister on behalf of those on this side of the House in praising the voluntary sector and charities across Scotland, which have stepped up to support so many people right across the nation. At the same time, however, charities face an existential financial crisis. The Minister will be aware that a report earlier this year from the Office of the

Scottish Charity Regulator found that a fifth of Scottish charities were facing uncertainty because of poor finances over the next 12 months. With new restrictions now coming in across Scotland in different phases, will the Minister commit to working with the Secretary of State, with Scottish Ministers and, importantly, with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ensure that these voluntary sector organisations get any additional funding that they may need to support the people of Scotland during the pandemic?

Iain Stewart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. He is right. I have had a number of meetings with the Association of Chief Officers of Scottish Voluntary Organisations and they have an unprecedented leadership challenge. One of them put to me the analogy that they are trying to fix the wings of an aircraft when it is in flight. There is an enormous challenge for all of us, whether in government, in the charities themselves or in the private sector, to work closely together, for us to help them through this and for them to help us to rebuild our economy and society better than when we went into this period.

Economic Support: Covid-19

John Howell (Henley) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the economic support available for Scottish businesses during the covid-19 outbreak. [908454]

Mr Speaker: This question, No. 16, has been withdrawn, so the substantive question will be from David Mundell, Secretary of State to answer.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): Am I answering David Mundell’s question?

Mr Speaker: You are answering the substantive question: No. 16.

Mr Jack: I did not bring that with me, sorry.

Mr Speaker: Let us carry on then. If the Secretary of State does not have the answer, it is easy—I call David Mundell.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con) [V]: There are many different ways in which the Government can provide economic support to Scottish businesses during covid-19. For the Scotch whisky industry, the biggest help in retaining jobs and supporting its businesses would be for the Government to resolve the US tariffs dispute, rather than escalate it by applying further retaliatory tariffs. Can my right hon. Friend update the House on progress on this vital issue for Scottish businesses and jobs?

Mr Jack: From memory, question 16—it has been withdrawn altogether from the papers I was given this morning—was about transport, and I will say on that—

Mr Speaker: Order. Secretary of State, the question is on the Order Paper, and I can assure you it is not about transport. Answer the question from David Mundell.

Mr Jack: To answer my right hon. Friend's question, the Secretary of State for International Trade last night had a Zoom call with MPs from across the House, and I know that she stressed that the UK Government are determined to settle this issue as soon as possible and to mitigate the effects for those who are impacted by it. In short, we continue to raise the issue with the highest levels of the US Administration.

Strengthening the Union

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen the Union. [908455]

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen the Union. [908462]

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen the Union. [908469]

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen the Union. [908472]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): The good news is that I did bring this answer with me. This Government have always stressed the importance of the Union. The UK is a family of nations that shares social, cultural and economic ties that together make us far safer, more secure and more prosperous. As we have seen throughout the covid crisis, it is the economic strength of the Union and our commitment to the sharing and pooling of resources that have supported jobs and businesses throughout Scotland. It is the strength of our Union that will enable us to rebuild our economy following the crisis.

Ben Everitt: I am delighted to hear the Secretary of State support the Union. The Prime Minister's review into boosting transport links across the country is very welcome. Does the Secretary of State agree that this review of quality transport links will go a long way to levelling up economic opportunity wherever we are in the UK?

Mr Jack: There are no flies on my hon. Friend—he spotted that I am a Unionist, and he has been able to highlight the importance of improving transport links. That is why I am so disappointed that the Scottish Government are not engaging in Sir Peter Hendy's review of connectivity across our United Kingdom. That attitude is letting down the people of Scotland, who would benefit from those improvements.

Caroline Ansell: My great grandfather served in the infantry regiment of The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Will my right hon. Friend join me in commemorating all those Scottish servicemen who fought in the British Army for the freedom of the United Kingdom and the world, and in thanking servicemen and women in Scotland today who are engaged in our fight against the virus?

Mr Jack: I am more than happy to join my hon. Friend in thanking today's servicemen and women, and I am sure the whole House will join me in remembering all those who laid down their lives in defence of our country and the freedoms that we enjoy today.

Simon Jupp: I represent a constituency that is geographically distant from Scotland, but I know people from Scotland who have made East Devon their home. They, like me, believe we are stronger together and cherish our precious Union. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK Government's efforts during the pandemic—not least the furlough scheme and the £8.2 billion to Scottish public services—show that we have a common drive to defeat the virus, whether in Edinburgh or Exeter, and the SNP needs to focus on delivery, not division?

Mr Jack: In the interests of brevity, as it was a very full question, I will say: absolutely, yes.

James Grundy: What measures is the Department taking to strengthen economic ties and promote business opportunities between Scottish communities and English communities such as those in my constituency of Leigh?

Mr Jack: The Union connectivity review that I referred to earlier and the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill, which is currently going through Parliament, will both promote the economic ties that my hon. Friend refers to. They will protect vital trading links and improve transport links.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: The Secretary of State is doing such a fantastic job of strengthening the Union that support for independence is at a historic high and has been at a sustained majority all year. Saying no to a majority in Scotland is only going to drive support for independence even higher. Apparently, he was only joking when he said that there would be no indyref for 40 years, just after John Major said that there would be two referendums in the next few years. The Secretary of State is renowned for his legendary wit and humour, but the Scottish people are not finding this democracy denial funny any more. What is the difference between denying a majority in the Trump White House and denying a majority in the Scotland Office?

Mr Jack: That is quite a tenuous link, but I will answer the question. To be quite simple, my belief is that we should stick to the referendum from 2014 and respect it. It was very clear—the SNP said it at the time—that it was a once-in-a-generation referendum. I do not believe that we should go into a process of neverendums, which are divisive, unsettling and bad for jobs in Scotland. We should respect democracy, and that is what I am doing—democracy that was handed out by the Scottish people in 2014.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: The Prime Minister described last December's general election as "once-in-a-generation", but I hope the Secretary of State is not suggesting that there will not be another one for 40 years. He seems to think that the way to strengthen the Union is by forcing a hard Brexit on Scotland against our will, taking an axe to devolution with the internal market Bill and denying any democratic choice on Scotland's future until adults like me are dead. On that basis, does he think that the best recipe for a happy marriage is to lock up the wife, take away her chequebook and just keep refusing a divorce?

Mr Jack: No, I think that it is quite straightforward. I think that people should respect democracy, as I said in my previous answer to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). We are respecting democracy. We are acknowledging this is once in a generation; we do not believe Scotland should be thrown on to the uncertainty of neverendums. It is very straightforward: a generation, by any calculation, is 25 years and, frankly, SNP Members just have to accept that and focus on what matters, which is recovering from this pandemic and us all pulling together.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

[908619] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 11 November.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I know the whole House will want to join me in sending our deepest sympathies to the family and friends of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks Lord Sacks, who sadly passed away on Saturday. His leadership had a profound impact on our whole country and across the world. May his memory be a blessing.

This morning, I attended the service at Westminster Abbey to mark the centenary of the tomb of the unknown warrior. Armistice Day allows us to give thanks to all those who have served, and continue to serve, and those who have given their lives in service of this country.

Ruth Cadbury: According to Home Office figures, just 12% of Windrush victims have received compensation and nine people have died waiting. This is two and a half years after the Windrush taskforce was set up. What will the Government do and what will the Prime Minister do both to rectify this injustice and to ensure that no others who have come to the UK to live and work suffer in the same way as the Windrush victims?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. What happened to the Windrush generation was a disgrace and a scandal, and we are doing our best collectively to make amends. I can tell her I have met members of that generation, and this Government are taking steps to accelerate the payments and to make sure that those who are in line with payments are given every opportunity and all the information they need to avail themselves of the compensation that they deserve.

[908620] **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks in respect of our servicemen and women, past and present, in protecting our peace?

With regard to our battle against covid, senior Church leaders have this past week issued a call for prayer across our nation. The Prime Minister, I know, is very well aware of the persecution suffered by countless people of faith across the world for wanting to pray and manifest their faith. Will he join me in supporting our Church leaders' call for prayer and in championing the universal human right of freedom of religion or belief wherever one lives?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed, and I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she does to champion that cause. We all know that wherever freedom of belief is under attack, other human rights are under attack as well. We will continue to work closely with like-minded partners to stand up for members of such marginalised communities.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I join the Prime Minister in his comments about Jonathan Sacks? May I also send all our thoughts to those affected by the terrible events in Saudi Arabia this morning? May I welcome the victory of President-elect Biden and Vice-President-elect Harris—a new era of decency, integrity and compassion in the White House? May I also welcome the fantastic news about a possible breakthrough in the vaccine? It is early days, but this will give hope to millions of people that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Today is Armistice Day, and I am sure the whole House will join me in praising the remarkable work of the veterans charities such as Help for Heroes and the Royal British Legion. Like many other charities, Help for Heroes has seen a significant drop in its funding during this pandemic, and it is now having to take very difficult decisions about redundancies and keeping open recovery centres for veterans. So can the Prime Minister commit today that the Government will do whatever they can to make sure our armed forces charities have the support that they need so that they can carry on supporting our veterans?

The Prime Minister: I echo entirely what the right hon. and learned Gentleman says about Help for Heroes; it is a quite remarkable charity and does wonderful things for veterans. In these difficult times, many charities are, of course, finding it tough, and in addition to what the Government are doing to support charities by cutting business rates on their premises and cutting VAT on their shops, I urge everybody wherever possible to make online contributions to charities that are currently struggling.

Keir Starmer: I thank the Prime Minister for his reply. The truth is that the Chancellor's package for forces charities was just £6 million during this pandemic, and that is just not sufficient. May I ask the Prime Minister to reconsider that support on their behalf, because at the same time we have all seen this weekend that the Government can find £670,000 for PR consultants? And that is the tip of the iceberg: new research today shows that the Government have spent at least £130 million of taxpayers' money on PR companies, and that is in this year alone. Does the Prime Minister think that is a reasonable use of taxpayers' money?

The Prime Minister: I think the right hon. and learned Gentleman is referring to the vaccines taskforce, and after days in which the Labour party has attacked the vaccines taskforce, I think it might be in order for him to pay tribute to it for securing 40 million doses. By the way, the expenditure to which he refers was to help to raise awareness of vaccines, to fight the anti-vaxxers and to persuade the people of this country—300,000—to take part in trials without which we cannot have vaccines. So I think he should take it back.

Keir Starmer: Nobody is attacking individuals—everybody is supporting the vaccine—but £130 million, Prime Minister: there is a real question about the way that contracts are being awarded and about basic transparency and accountability. I know the Prime Minister does not like that, but this is not the Prime Minister's money; it is taxpayers' money. The Prime Minister may well not know the value of the pound in his pocket, but the people who send us here do, and they expect us to spend it wisely.

Let me illustrate an example of the Government's lax attitude to taxpayers' money. Earlier this year, the Government paid about £150 million to a company called Ayanda Capital to deliver face masks. Can the Prime Minister tell the House how many usable face masks were actually provided to NHS workers on the frontline under that contract?

The Prime Minister: We are in the middle of a global pandemic in which this Government have so far secured and delivered 32 billion items of personal protective equipment; and, yes, it is absolutely correct that it has been necessary to work with the private sector and with manufacturers who provide such equipment, some of them more effectively than others, but it is the private sector that in the end makes the PPE, it is the private sector that provides the testing equipment, and it is the private sector that, no matter how much the Labour party may hate it, provides the vaccines and the scientific breakthroughs.

Keir Starmer: The answer is none: not a single face mask—at a cost of £150 million. That is not an isolated example. We already know that consultants are being paid £7,000 a day to work on test and trace, and a company called Radox has been given a contract, without process, for £347 million; that is the same company that had to recall 750,000 unused covid tests earlier this summer on safety grounds.

There is a sharp contrast between the way the Government spray money at companies that do not deliver and their reluctance to provide long-term support to businesses and working people at the sharp end of this crisis. The Chancellor spent months saying that extending furlough was

“not the kind of certainty that British businesses or British workers need”—[*Official Report*, 24 September 2020; Vol. 680, c. 1157]—

only then to do a U-turn at the last minute. Yesterday's unemployment figures show the cost of that delay: redundancies up by a record 181,000 in the last quarter. What is the Prime Minister's message to those who have lost their jobs because of the Chancellor's delay?

The Prime Minister: With great respect to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, he knows full well that the furlough programme has continued throughout this pandemic. It went right the way through to October; it is now going through to March. It is one of the most generous programmes in the world, with 80% of income supported by this Government and an overall package of £210 billion going in to support jobs, families and livelihoods throughout this country. I think this country can be very proud of the way we have looked after the entire population, and we are going to continue to do so. The right hon. and learned Gentleman should bear

in mind that the net effect of those furlough programmes—all the provision that we have made—is disproportionately beneficial for the poorest and neediest in society, which is what one nation Conservatism is all about.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister must know that because the furlough was not extended until the last minute, thousands of people were laid off. The figures tell a different story: redundancies, as I say, at a record high of 181,000; 780,000 off the payroll since March; the Office for National Statistics saying unemployment is rising sharply—so much for putting their arms around everybody. The trouble is that the British people are paying the price for the mistakes of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. If they had handed contracts to companies that could deliver, public money would have been saved. If they had extended furlough sooner, jobs would have been saved. If they had brought in a circuit breaker when the science said so, lives would have been saved.

Let me deal with another mistake. The Chancellor has repeatedly failed to close gaps in support for the self-employed. Millions are affected by this. It is bad enough to have made that mistake in March, but seven months on, the Institute for Fiscal Studies says the scheme remains—its words—

“wasteful and badly targeted for the self-employed”.

The Institute of Directors says:

“Many self-employed...continue to be left out in the cold.”

After seven months and so many warnings, why are the Chancellor and the Prime Minister still failing our self-employed?

The Prime Minister: Unquestionably, this pandemic has been hard on the people of this country, and unquestionably there are people who have suffered throughout the pandemic and people whose livelihoods have suffered, but we have done everything that we possibly can to help. As for the self-employed, 2.6 million of them have received support, at a cost of £13 billion—quite right. We have also, of course, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, uprated universal credit. That will continue until next year. He now champions universal credit, by the way, and calls for its uprating to be extended. He stood on a manifesto to abolish universal credit.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister just doesn't get it. I know very well that the self-employment income support scheme has been extended, but the Prime Minister must know that that scheme simply does not apply to millions of self-employed people. They have been left out for seven months.

There is a real human cost to this. This week on LBC, I spoke to a self-employed photographer called Chris. He said to me:

“Our...industry has been devastated... Three million of us that have fallen through the cracks... Our businesses are falling—absolutely falling—and crashing each day.”

He asked me to raise that with the Chancellor. I will do the next best thing. What would the Prime Minister say to Chris and millions like him who are desperately waiting for the Chancellor to address this injustice?

The Prime Minister: What I would say to Chris—and what I say to the right hon. and learned Gentleman and to the whole country—is the best way to get his job

working again, the best way to get this country back on its feet, is to continue on the path that we are driving the virus down. It is a week since we entered into the tough autumn measures that we are now in. I am grateful to the people of this country for the sacrifices that they are making, and I am particularly grateful to the people of Liverpool and elsewhere—tens of thousands of people in Liverpool are taking part in the mass testing work that is going on there. It is fantastic news that we now have the realistic prospect of a vaccine.

Science has given us two big boxing gloves, as it were, with which to pummel this virus, but neither of them is capable of delivering a knockout blow on its own. That is why this country needs to continue to work hard, to keep discipline and to observe the measures that we have put in. I am grateful the support that the Labour party is now giving for those measures. That is the way to do it: hands, face, space; follow the guidance, protect the NHS and save lives.

[908623] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con) [V]: As we and all countries across the world tackle the pandemic, is it not right that we also have to secure our post-EU future? Are we not doing that by securing help for our rural communities and securing our borders?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely; I thank my hon. Friend. I can tell him that the landmark Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill receives Royal Assent today, thanks to this House, paving the way for the fulfilling of our manifesto commitment to end free movement and have a new, fair points-based immigration system—one of the advantages of leaving the European Union that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) would of course like to reverse.

Mr Speaker: Let us head up to Scotland and the leader of the SNP, Ian Blackford.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister on the death of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks? This being Armistice Day, we commemorate the day 102 years ago on the eleventh hour of the eleventh month when the guns fell silent and all those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in conflict since then. I also want to send our best wishes to Joe Biden and Kamala Harris on winning the election in north America. I look forward to the leadership they will show on the issues of climate change and fighting back against covid among other things.

The figures published by the Office for National Statistics yesterday demonstrate what the SNP has been warning about for months: that the UK faces a growing Tory unemployment crisis. It is now beyond doubt that the Chancellor's last-minute furlough U-turn came far too late for thousands who have already lost their jobs as a result of Tory cuts, delays and dither. UK unemployment has now risen to 4.8%. Redundancies are at a record high and nearly 800,000 fewer people are in employment. To support those who have lost their incomes, will the Prime Minister now commit to making the £20 uplift to universal credit permanent and to extending it to legacy benefits, so that no one—no one, Prime Minister—is left behind?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman, the leader of the Scottish nationalists, is now supporting universal credit. He was opposed to it at the last election. Yes, of course that uplift continues until March. I am delighted to say that the furlough scheme is being extended right the way through to March as well. That will support people across our whole United Kingdom, protecting jobs and livelihoods across the whole UK in exactly the way that he and I would both want.

Ian Blackford [V]: May I respectfully say to the Prime Minister that the idea is that he tries to answer the question that has been put to him? It is shameful that the Prime Minister still refuses to give a commitment to the £20 uprating of universal credit. The SNP will continue to demand a permanent U-turn on Tory plans to cut universal credit.

Another group who have been left behind by this Prime Minister are the 3 million people who have been completely excluded from UK Government support. Since the start of this crisis, the Prime Minister has repeatedly refused to lift a finger to help those families. In the run-up to Christmas, those forgotten millions will be among those who are struggling to get by and are worried about their future. Will the Prime Minister finally fix the serious gaps in his support schemes to help the excluded, or will he make it a bitter winter for millions of families across the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman knows, I hope, that we are not only continuing with the uprating of universal credit until next year, but have invested £210 billion in jobs and livelihoods. We have also just brought forward a winter support package for the poorest and neediest: supporting young people and kids who need school meals, and supporting people throughout our society throughout the tough period of covid, as I think the entire country would expect. That is the right thing to do and we will continue to do it.

[908624] **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): As we continue to protect the NHS to help to save lives, regional airports are playing a critical role in delivering medical supplies and equipment across the UK, yet at Exeter airport in my constituency overall passenger numbers are at some 5% of normal. Regional airports are facing multibillion-pound business rates bills and they are asking for a payment holiday similar to the one for businesses in retail and hospitality, including supermarket giants. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give East Devon's aircraft engineers, cabin crew and pilots that the Government will look at temporarily scrapping business rates, so that our regional airports can keep the country connected throughout the pandemic?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will have heard my hon. Friend's words. I thank him for what he said; he is quite right to champion regional airports and the aviation business. The Bank of England's covid corporate financing facility is helping to support the airlines' current liquidity problems, with the sector drawing down £1.8 billion in support. The Department for Transport is also looking at giving bespoke support to particular regional airports to keep them going in these tough times.

[908621] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): West Wales and the valleys received over €2 billion in direct EU economic investment during the 2014 to 2020 multiannual financial framework. That support will come to an end in a matter of weeks, yet the British Government have yet to publish their alternative proposals despite all the promises of “not a penny less”. When will the Prime Minister level with the people of Carmarthenshire and the rest of Wales about the British Government being about to pick our pockets?

The Prime Minister: On the contrary, the UK Government are continuing to support all parts of the UK. We will now, as the hon. Gentleman knows, have the opportunity to fund projects with our own money, rather than siphoning it through Brussels. The quantum will be identical and, in addition, through the Barnett formula, the UK Government have already given the Welsh Government £2.4 billion in capital funding alone this year.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): While we are rightly focused on battling covid, we should not ignore humanitarian injustices and the plight of persecuted minorities. On Remembrance Sunday, 82 year-old Mahboob Ahmad Khan was shot dead, the fourth Ahmadi recently slain in Peshawar. His crime under Pakistani law: to call himself an Ahmadi Muslim, whose creed is love for all, hatred for none. Does my right hon. Friend agree that hatred preached in Pakistan ends up on the streets of Britain and that it is in the interests of our own security that Her Majesty’s Government should make it clear to Pakistan that state-supported persecution must end?

The Prime Minister: I agree passionately with my hon. Friend. I can tell him that that is why the Minister for South Asia and the Commonwealth recently raised this very issue with Pakistan’s Human Rights Minister and we urge the Government of Pakistan to guarantee the fundamental rights of all their citizens.

[908622] **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): Unfortunately, we have recently seen the largest increase in Welsh unemployment for nearly 30 years. The Prime Minister will know that the hospitality and events sectors have been dealt a heavy blow by covid-19, but we cannot forget about the businesses in their supply chains. Many have not been eligible for grant support and, although welcome, bounce-back loans and the furlough scheme do not offer them support to cover running costs through the winter months. Will the Prime Minister therefore raise this matter with the Chancellor and bring forward a package that offers businesses in the supply chain some hope of seeing the spring?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an excellent point. One of the things that we are looking at, together with local authorities and the Welsh tourist authorities, is ways of making sure that we keep a tourist season going throughout the tough winter months.

[908627] **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): Christmas is a time for joy and the celebration of hope. In Rother Valley, we have a renowned Christmas scene. From the Christmas festival in Dinington to Christmas wreath-making in Todwick, the Maltby Lions Santa sleigh ride, carols at All Saints in Aston and even my

new annual Christmas card competition, there is something for everyone in Rother Valley. In the spirit of Christmas and giving, will the Prime Minister assure me that families and friends will be reunited and able to celebrate this most important, happy and holy occasion, as we usually do?

The Prime Minister: All I can say is that the more intensively we together follow the rules and the more we follow the guidance in this tough period leading up to 2 December, the bigger the chance collectively we will have of as normal a Christmas as possible and getting things open in time for Christmas as well.

[908626] **James Murray** (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: On Sunday, a constituent emailed me about the track and trace system. Her family had received multiple calls asking for the same information and there was confusion, as the operative admitted that they were struggling with London postcodes and local school names. Last week, the former Health Secretary and Conservative Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), said:

“Centralised contact tracing is always going to be less effective than a”

localised model. Will the Prime Minister now admit that the current outsourced model has been a waste of time and taxpayers’ money?

The Prime Minister: We are looking into the issue of repeat calls, but to say that the test and trace system has been a waste of time and money, which I think is what I heard the hon. Member say—I could not disagree more. It has enabled us to locate where the disease is surging, to take appropriate measures and to allow people in huge numbers to get tested. More people have been tested in this country than in any other country in Europe. The PCR tests that NHS Test and Trace is conducting are of real value in fighting the disease, and now we are rolling out the lateral flow rapid turnaround tests as well.

[908629] **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): With yesterday’s positive news on the covid vaccine and the roll-out of mass testing, and as York’s virus figures continue to fall well below the level at which we were put into tier 2, can the Prime Minister give York some hope of sustaining our great city by clearly outlining the criteria under which from 2 December we can escape immediately into tier 1? Will he also urge York council to take up the Government’s offer of mass testing?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed I urge York council and councils across the land to take up the offer of mass lateral flow testing—it is a very exciting possibility. It is, as I said, one of the boxing gloves we hope to wield to pummel this disease into submission—the other is the prospect of a vaccine—and that is what we will do continuously throughout the weeks and months ahead. But I must stress that the way to get ourselves in the best position to achieve that is to make the current restrictions work so that we can come out well, back into the tiers on 2 December.

[908628] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Prime Minister will doubtless recall meeting my constituent Ronnie Norquoy on board his crab boat

Carvela when he visited Stromness and Orkney in July. I know Mr Norquoy told the Prime Minister about the problems caused by the Migration Advisory Committee classing deckhands as unskilled labour. Since that conversation—which must have landed quite well, because he was allowed back on to dry land safely—the Migration Advisory Committee has changed its advice so that deckhands are now regarded as skilled labour for whom visas can be issued. The Home Secretary, unfortunately, refuses to implement that advice. Will he put the Home Secretary straight on this one, please? Get it sorted.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. It is a subject in which I have a keen interest, because I had a wonderful morning on that crab boat where there were fantastic, prodigious quantities of crabs that, as I recollect, were being sold to China. I will make sure that the Home Secretary is immediately seized of the matter and that we take it forward. That is one of the things that we are now able to do thanks to taking back control of our immigration system, which, alas, his party opposed for so long and would reverse if it could.

[908632] **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough) (Con): I strongly welcome the introduction of the National Security and Investment Bill today. Does the Prime Minister agree that when countries trample human rights at home and threaten our allies abroad, they should not expect to be able to buy up strategically important industries in this country with no scrutiny, not least when they refuse such investments in their own countries?

The Prime Minister: Yes. One of the many merits of the excellent conversation I had yesterday with President-elect Joe Biden was that we were strongly agreed on the need once again for the United Kingdom and the United States to stand together and stick up for our values around the world: to stick up for human rights, to stick up for global free trade, to stick up for NATO and to work together in the fight against climate change. It was refreshing, I may say, to have that conversation, and I look forward to many more.

[908630] **Ms Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): The Prime Minister spoke for many of us when he took a call yesterday to congratulate President-elect Biden and Vice-President-elect Harris on their emphatic win in the US presidential election, so does the Prime Minister now have any advice for his erstwhile best friend, President Trump, whose continuing refusal to accept the result is both embarrassing for him and dangerous for American democracy?

The Prime Minister: I had, and have, a good relationship with the previous President. I do not resile from that—it is the duty of all British Prime Ministers to have a good relationship with the White House—but I am delighted to find the many areas in which the incoming Biden-Harris Administration are able to make common cause with us. In particular, it was extremely exciting to talk to President-elect Biden about what he wants to do with the COP26 summit next year, in which the UK is leading the world in driving down carbon emissions and tackling climate change.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): This Armistice Day, restrictions mean that we cannot mark the occasion with services as we normally would.

However, in Heywood and Middleton, veterans associations are following the guidance to mark the day in a covid-safe way. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister join me in praising them, the Royal British Legion and, indeed, all those across the United Kingdom who are doing their best to ensure that we can pay tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice?

The Prime Minister: Yes indeed. It was really impressive to see the way the Royal British Legion organised covid-secure memorials across the country. As we salute our veterans, I just want to remind the House that we have launched a new railcard for our veterans and their families that will entitle them to substantial reductions in rail fares, and that we are introducing a national insurance break for employers of veterans in their first year of employment.

[908631] **Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab): Every day, there is a new story about dodgy contracts signed by this Government. Research by Tussell, the data provider, shows that the Government take an average of two and a half months to publish covid-related contracts, exceeding the legal limit of 30 days. Will the Prime Minister commit to publishing all contracts within the legal limit, and does he accept that the failure to address this scandal affects his Government's awarding of public contracts?

The Prime Minister: Of course we publish all contracts, and quite right too. I would just respectfully remind the hon. Lady, as I reminded the Leader of the Opposition earlier, that it is absolutely necessary in a massive global pandemic to work with those in the private sector, not to scorn them or despise them, and to understand that it is they who make the PPE and the tests. Indeed, it is thanks to the researches of giant conglomerates—which Labour would break up if it could—that we have the possibility of a vaccine.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): On Armistice Day, as we remember those who gave their lives for our country and those who still serve, will the Prime Minister give a positive response to the “Living in our shoes: understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families” report on making life better for our armed forces families? These wonderful people put up with more separation, moving of family homes and worry about the safety of their loved ones than anyone else, and looking after them should be a national priority.

The Prime Minister: Our armed services simply could not function without the support of their families, and I thank my hon. Friend for what he is doing to raise this issue and for the comprehensive piece of research that he refers to. We are making good progress on increasing childcare provision for armed services families and on our support for employment of partners of members of the armed services.

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

12.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Lockdown: Homelessness and Rough Sleepers

12.38 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government if he will make a statement on his plans to prevent homelessness and protect rough sleepers during the second national lockdown.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Kelly Tolhurst): As we look ahead to the winter months, it is vital that we work together to prevent increases in homelessness and rough sleeping. The Government have set out unprecedented support on this issue, dedicating over £700 million to tackling homelessness and rough sleeping this year alone. Our work on rough sleeping has been shown not only to be world-leading but to have saved hundreds of lives. We are dedicated to continuing to protect vulnerable people in this period of restrictions and through the winter months.

We used the summer to work with local authorities on individual local plans for the coming months. Last week, the Prime Minister announced the Protect programme—the next step in our ongoing, targeted support for rough sleepers. That will provide a further £15 million, ensuring that support is in place for areas that need it most, and addressing the housing and health challenges for rough sleepers during this period of national restrictions. That is on top of the £10 million cold weather fund, available to all councils to provide rough sleepers with safe accommodation over the coming months. That means that all local areas will be eligible for support this winter. It builds on the success of the ongoing Everyone In campaign in September. We have successfully supported over 29,000 people, with over 10,000 people in emergency accommodation. Nearly 19,000 people have been provided with settled accommodation or move-on support. We continue to help to move people on from emergency accommodation with the Next Steps accommodation programme.

On 17 September, we announced NSAP allocations to local authorities, to pay for immediate support and to ensure that people do not return to the streets, and £91.5 million was allocated to 274 councils across England. On 29 October, we announced allocations to local partners to deliver long-term move-on accommodation. More than 3,300 new long-term homes for rough sleepers across the country have been approved, subject to due diligence, backed by more than £150 million. We are committed to tackling homelessness, and firmly believe that no one should be without a roof over their head.

Throughout the pandemic, we have established an unprecedented package of support to protect renters, which remains in place. That includes legislating through the Coronavirus Act 2020 on delays as to when landlords can evict tenants and a six-month stay on possession proceedings in court. We have quickly and effectively introduced more than £9 billion of measures in 2020-21 that benefit those facing financial disruption during the current situation. The measures include increasing universal and working tax credit by £1,040 a year for 12 months and significant investment in local housing allowance of nearly £1 billion. As further support for renters this

winter, we have asked bailiffs not to carry out evictions during national restrictions in England, except in the most serious of circumstances. As the pandemic evolves, we will continue working closely with local authorities, the sector and across Government to support the most vulnerable from this pandemic. These measures further demonstrate our commitment to assist the most vulnerable in society.

Thangam Debbonaire [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. The Minister's words and the Prime Minister's order last week to stay home will ring hollow for people with no home. In March, the Government told councils and charities that they should try to bring rough sleepers in, and the extraordinary effort prevented thousands of infections, more than 1,000 hospital admissions and 266 deaths. But now the Government's rough sleeping tsar is no longer in post, and she has warned that we are facing a "perfect storm of awfulness". Many of those brought off the streets have returned and thousands more are newly homeless, with a record high 50% increase in young people sleeping rough since last year in London alone.

What has changed since March? It is colder, and the cold weather fund is lower than it was last year. So can the Minister tell the House why the Government have lowered their ambition? Their plan provides neither the leadership nor the funding to ensure all rough sleepers have a covid-secure place; £15 million in funding will be given not to all councils, but only to the 10 with the highest rough sleeping rates. Seventeen health and homelessness organisations wrote to the Prime Minister to warn against the use of night shelters as not covid-safe. Why have the Government refused to publish the Public Health England advice on this decision? The plan makes no reference to people with no recourse to public funds. Instead there is a rule change so that rough sleeping will lead to deportation. Does the Minister agree that it is immoral for people to be deported for sleeping rough?

On Armistice Day, will the Minister ensure that the Government record whether homeless people have a service record, so that we can get an accurate picture of the scale and need of those who have served our country?

Finally, the homelessness crisis is the result of 10 years of Tory failure, so will the Minister now commit to abolishing section 21 evictions, as the Government said they would, to prevent a further rise in homelessness, and invest in the support and social housing we need so that we can genuinely end rough sleeping for good?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. I hope she recognises, and I think she did at the beginning, that this Government have put £700 million into homelessness and rough sleeping support this year alone. That is unprecedented support, and it is decisive action that this Government took in dealing with the covid crisis. Although I strongly object to the fact that many have returned to the streets, we were working on this plan in the summer with local authorities in order to work out what the next steps would be after the Everyone In programme. As I outlined in my opening answer, more than £266 million is being provided to local authorities in order to provide move-on and Next Steps accommodation, with more than £150 million of that invested in long-term support and accommodation for rough sleepers.

[Kelly Tolhurst]

To pick up on the point about the winter allowance being lower than last year, this must be taken in the context of the unprecedented amount of funding that the Government have provided in this area, in order to protect those individuals who were at threat of homelessness and rough sleeping throughout the pandemic. Indeed, a £10 million winter fund is available to all local authorities throughout the country, but it is right that the £15 million fund that was announced last year—the Protect programme—is focused on the areas in which there is the most need. We are working intensively, not only with those first-wave initial boroughs with the highest level of rough sleeping but in collaboration with all local authorities throughout the United Kingdom, in order to understand the challenges they face and the needs they have.

On the point about no recourse to public funds, I would like to make the hon. Lady aware that the rules of eligibility for immigration status, including for those with no recourse to public funds, have not changed. Local authorities are able to use their judgment when assessing the support that can lawfully be provided in relation to those individuals and their individual needs: this is already happening, as it does with extreme weather and where there is a potential risk to life. Local authorities provide basic support for care needs that do not solely arise from destitution, whether for migrants who have severe health problems or for families where the wellbeing of children is involved. Also, it is just not true that we are deporting individuals who are rough sleeping.

I will also pick up on the point about veterans. I am very pleased to be standing here on Armistice Day, and am pleased that the hon. Lady has highlighted the plight of veterans. Our veterans play a vital role in keeping our country safe, and we are committed to ensuring that we are able to provide them with the support they need to adjust back into civilian life. The duty to refer in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 states that public authorities are required to, with individual consent, refer

“former members of the regular armed forces”

to their local housing associations. There are a number of support services available, including Veterans’ Gateway and online, web and telephone resources for veterans, through which they can access a housing specialist who has up-to-date information on any vacancies that are available. In June this year, we announced new measures to ensure that access to social housing is improved for members of our armed forces.

Mr Speaker, our Protect programme will protect vulnerable individuals from the threat of rough sleeping during the restriction process and into the winter, and tackle some of the health issues they are experiencing.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con) [V]: The Everyone In programme ensured that homeless people and rough sleepers had a roof over their head during the pandemic, and I welcome the Protect programme initiative. However, it is vital that our solutions are also long-term and sustainable. I welcomed the roll-out of the three-year Housing First pilot in Greater Manchester, and the recent announcement of 3,300 units of move-on accommodation for rough sleepers. Would my hon. Friend also consider bringing forward future funding allocations

so that local authorities, mental health charities and agencies that are able to offer wraparound support can have the certainty they need to ensure the success of these initiatives?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the wraparound services that organisations within local authorities provide to some of those individuals who are experiencing complex issues, such as substance misuse and mental health concerns. I am grateful that she highlighted the Housing First pilot projects, and we are encouraging and working with local authorities to get individuals who need such support into that programme.

I will also work hard to make sure that we are able to develop and work with local authorities to assist them to provide the local services and wraparound support that those individuals need. It is not just a home they need; they need the support services around them, and I am determined to be able to do that.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing this urgent question. This feels like groundhog day, with the Government yet again in the spotlight for their decision to withdraw prematurely the protections and support for the most vulnerable people during a second wave of covid. In recent weeks, they have had to U-turn on providing free school meals and on extending furlough. I rather suspect that, quite soon, they will have to U-turn on providing more support for people who have been left homeless.

Thankfully, in Scotland we have a Government with a bit more foresight than this bungling British Government, who reek of incompetence and chaos every single day. The SNP Government in Scotland have extended the ban on evictions until March, and we have committed to looking to extend that further to September if the evidence shows a clear need. Will the Minister do likewise?

I am appalled by the reports that the British Government plan to deport non-UK nationals who are sleeping rough. That is a totally inhumane policy, devoid of any compassion and fairness, even by this Conservative Government’s standards. Will they now urgently reinstate the pause on asylum evictions so that communities and individuals who we know are at greater risk of covid-19 are not put at increased risk?

Finally, has the Minister’s Department ever received any advice from Public Health England or, indeed, health directors about the risks to black and minority ethnic people being left homeless? If so, will she publish it? If not, why has she not commissioned it?

Kelly Tolhurst: I respect the hon. Gentleman’s comments, but he is completely incorrect in relation to this Government’s ongoing support for rough sleepers during the pandemic. We carried out an unprecedented and world-leading programme in Everyone In, we worked with local authorities constructively and intensively to develop programmes for the continuation of that support through Next Steps and Move On, and we secured accommodation. This Protect programme is the next step within that, and it is the Government taking quick action for what is now required within the restricted period and into the winter.

We announced the winter fund only a couple of weeks ago, and now we are on the Protect programme, so it is absolutely incorrect and completely wrong to suggest that this Government have not been taking the issue seriously and have not put the resources where they are needed. I have been determined over recent weeks, as the Minister, to make sure we have local authority by local authority checks on what is happening, looking at the local interactions on the ground.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) is categorically incorrect to say that we are deporting EU nationals who are sleeping rough. That is not what is happening, as he knows. In actual fact, we have been working with local authorities on the support and offer they can give to immigrants with no recourse to public funds at local level. Quite rightly, my colleagues in the Home Office and I are working through many issues that affect a number of different people.

I must also point out that all these individuals are different. Every individual has specific needs, and it is right that we work intensively with local authorities to make sure those individual needs are considered.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have a lot of people who need to get in, and we have spent 15 minutes on the first three questions. We need to pick it up.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I welcome the measures and the very significant funding that the Minister has announced today. Does she agree that it is important to take the same kind of approach as that taken by Rugby Borough Council through its preventing homelessness and improving lives programme? That has made a tremendous difference to local families at risk of homelessness through early intervention by a dedicated support team, working with those who are vulnerable to prepare a plan to avoid a crisis situation later.

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is through the good practice of councils such as Rugby Borough Council and programmes of that nature that they are able to work with those families and individuals before there is a need for them to sleep rough or become homeless—it is prevention. We know that since we implemented the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, that has had a significant impact in many parts of the country. I am pleased that we are determined and committed to make sure we implement that even further and work with local authorities to get better results.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) [V]: First, congratulations are due on the efforts that were made to get rough sleepers off the streets from March onwards. Great work was done by councils with voluntary organisations and with good support financially from the Government as well. The real pressure on councils now, I am told by my own city of Sheffield, is from people presenting as homeless from the private rented sector. An increase has led Sheffield City Council, which is very good at dealing with these matters, to have 80 families now in hotels and another 200 in temporary accommodation. That will cost the council around £500,000 extra in this financial year. If dealing with homelessness has to be a priority for councils, which certainly it

should be, will the Minister make it a priority for Government to make sure that councils have the extra resources they need directly to continue delivering the services that people in the private rented sector will need in the coming, very trying months?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Member for his comments and articulation of the work that has been done by the Government and many local authorities and the voluntary and charitable sector in the covid-19 pandemic. He is absolutely right that we need to monitor and make sure we are working intensively with local authorities to understand the needs and the challenges. That is why we are working with local authorities to provide plans, and that is why we have put in the Next Steps funding, to provide that Move On and Next Steps accommodation support. We will continue that work through the winter and evaluate any impacts that we are seeing through the covid pandemic. We need to bear in mind that we have also provided councils with over £6 billion in funding to deal with some of the issues that are coming out of the covid pandemic.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her appointment and on attending the all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness within days and answering our questions. I also congratulate the Government on a brilliant job in pulling rough sleepers off the streets and putting them into secure accommodation. As my hon. Friend rightly says, the problem now is that every case of homelessness is a unique one. Many people who have been rough sleeping have physical and mental health problems, and they are also probably addicted to drink, drugs or other substances, so it is vital that we roll out the Housing First initiative from the pilot sites throughout the country and also fully fund my Homelessness Reduction Act when the funding for it comes to an end. Will she therefore commit to rolling out Housing First across the country and to ensuring that local authorities are fully funded for their duties under my Act?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and it was a pleasure to attend the APPG. I also thank him for his work in this area, for which he is a passionate advocate. Housing First is a great pilot, and we have continued to make sure that we can get individuals through those schemes, even during the pandemic. We are working with those sites to make sure that we can maximise that funding and that pilot to get the data and information. I am very supportive of the Housing First programme, and I would very much like to extend it. That is something that we will be working on in Government. I am committed to making sure that the Homelessness Reduction Act is implemented fully, and we will have further discussions about the funding to be able to deliver on that.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): A street homelessness reduction programme is not world leading if the numbers sleeping rough on our streets are rising. It is shocking that the number of young people sleeping rough on our streets is now at a record high. What will the Minister do to ensure that homelessness prevention services offer appropriate support to young people with particular needs, such as young prison leavers?

Kelly Tolhurst: I refute the assumption that rough sleeping numbers are increasing because of the action taken during the pandemic. If we look at the snapshot, we see that in actual fact at September there was a significant reduction in rough sleeping compared with last year. We have been working hard with local authorities in order that everyone who had been brought on to the Everyone In scheme has stayed in emergency accommodation or moved on to Next Steps accommodation. We are working hard to make sure that those numbers are reducing.

The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point about young people, their particular needs and the threat of becoming homeless. I am working with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice on how we can further support offenders. I have a particular interest in young people and care leavers, and we are investigating what other measures we can put in place to support them when they are at threat of homelessness.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitment to £311,000 for the borough of Gedling for local secure-accommodation schemes for people at risk of sleeping on the street. Does my hon. Friend agree that this funding is a significant step towards fulfilling our manifesto commitment to end rough sleeping by 2024? Will she join me in thanking all those in Gedling who have worked so hard to get vulnerable people into safe, secure accommodation?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his comment and pay tribute to those not only in his constituency but throughout the country who are working and have worked incredibly hard over the summer and through the pandemic to make sure that those individuals have had the help and support they require. He is absolutely right that this funding is part of our next steps to reach our target and make sure that we tackle some of the issues and develop the accommodation to house some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the Minister would agree that a number of homelessness charities have warned that tens of thousands of young people have been made homeless since the start of the pandemic. Many of these young people work in hospitality, so they have not had a job for many months. They are struggling to support themselves financially and make up the bulk of people in insecure accommodation. The Government's decision to bring forward the eviction ban was welcome, but it is not working, so will the Minister outline what steps the Government will take to ensure that the ban is properly enforced? The Minister said she would work with bailiffs to stop the evictions, but the reality on the ground is that that is not happening. What concrete steps will be taken to protect people from enforcement?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady highlights the plight of young people and the particular challenges that they face during the pandemic because of the types of work and sectors they are involved in. It is true that we have placed a ban on evictions and, before the announcement of the restrictions for this month, evictions were not taking place in areas in tier 3. That is obviously the case for this month, and we are also saying that no evictions should be taking place from 11 December into January. We are working with our colleagues in the MOJ, but I

must highlight the fact that we have given a six-month stay on those proceedings and only the most egregious cases will be taken forward. We will keep that under review, as the House would imagine, and make sure that we monitor it. If the hon. Lady is referring to particular circumstances, I would be interested to see the detail and I will happily communicate with her directly in respect of any individual circumstances.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): May I congratulate my hon. Friend on her appointment? The Rochester by-election feels like a lifetime ago.

The Government have a golden opportunity, having supported 29,000 people this year, to achieve their ambition of ending rough sleeping by the end of the Parliament. Will my hon. Friend commit to ensuring not only that those who have been helped will continue to get support, but that anyone at risk in the coming months will have the support that they need?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said, and it is a pleasure to be answering his question. He is absolutely right. Throughout the pandemic, we have been working with local authorities on an individual basis to understand the needs and challenges that are driving homelessness within those areas. I am committed to doing exactly that to make sure that we understand all those individual circumstances that are creating demands in different parts of the country. We are developing practices and policies to ensure that we can reach our commitment of ending rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament and of significantly reducing it.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Simply asking bailiffs not to physically remove desperate people who cannot afford to pay their rent until 11 January will not allow the Secretary of State to keep his promise that no one will lose their home due to a drop in income because of covid. How he could keep that promise would be, for example, to raise local housing allowance so that nobody finds that it is less than the rent they owe. Given that a third of those who are excluded are also private renters, he could also make sure that those people who have been excluded from financial support since March are no longer excluded and are given the support they need. Finally, given that the Government are in the mood for rushing through legislation, why do they not keep their manifesto promise and scrap section 21 evictions, and do it now?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, but, as I have outlined, we have asked bailiffs to pause evictions over the Christmas period and that is something that we will monitor and keep under review. It is absolutely right that we have taken this action, and the Secretary of State took it quickly and swiftly. We are still committed to abolishing section 21, but legislation must be balanced and considered to achieve the right outcomes for the sector, and we will keep those under review. The Government will continue to take decisive action, as they have done at all stages of the pandemic, and as I have done today in outlining our Protect programme.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): Our veterans have given so much in the service of this country and it is vital that we ensure that not a single one ends up on

the streets. Will the Minister therefore reassure me and my constituents who care deeply about this that veterans continue to have priority need to keep them off the streets and that the funding provided by this Government means that if someone finds themselves in hard times this winter, local authorities will have not only the duty, but the resources to give them the home that they deserve?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend is right to highlight again the vital role that our veterans have played in keeping this country safe. I am sure that everyone across this House feels, as I do, a great sadness and deep concern for those veterans who face hard times and are in very difficult circumstances. They have priority when it comes to the reduction of homelessness and will continue to do so. We will continue to work with our colleagues in the Ministry of Defence to ensure that those veterans can get access to the support and services that they need to continue with their lives.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Children's Commissioner has raised concern about the almost 130,000 children in England who spent the first lockdown in temporary accommodation, where poor conditions made it difficult to study, play and self-isolate. Why does the Minister think that there has been a 78% increase in the number of homeless children since 2010?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady asks about families and children in temporary accommodation. I, too, have concerns about any families and young people having to live their lives in temporary accommodation. That is why this Government are investing in the Move On programme and the Next Steps accommodation programme. We are also committed to investing long-term in our housebuilding programme, and in affordable and social rented homes. I totally understand the pressures and challenges for young people in insecure homes, and it is something that this Government and I are determined to resolve.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On a recent visit to YMCA Lincolnshire in Gainsborough, I was briefed on the excellent work done for homeless people in Lincoln at the charity's Nomad Centre. But when I talked to the chief executive this morning, she told me that her main worry is not so much the level of Government support, but whether it is trickling down from local government to charities quickly enough. That leads me to a wider point, which I suppose is also a Conservative one: in a pandemic we always think that the state can do everything, but we should really be empowering and supporting charities.

Kelly Tolhurst: We are working with local authorities to ensure that the support is trickling down to exactly where it is needed. We are working intensively with local authorities on plans for how that money will be spent, and on the impact on the ground. If my right hon. Friend has any further details, I will happily take up this issue. Indeed, if any Member across the House has any particular local issues, I will take them up and investigate further. It is true that this Government have taken unprecedented action to tackle rough sleeping and homelessness during the pandemic, and I remain committed to continuing that work.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab) [V]: After speaking with ACORN Liverpool and local volunteers such as Councillor Sarah Morton who are out on the ground every night in Liverpool helping the homeless, I would like to ask about one of their many concerns right now. The enforced evictions guidance has no basis in law. It does not protect against bailiffs, despite the Government saying that they have asked bailiffs to hold fire, and people are living in fear of eviction during this lockdown. The only way to ban evictions is through legislation, as with the ban between March and September. Will the Minister commit to such legislation and consider increasing funding for local authority discretionary housing payments, which are a vital resource in supporting early intervention and preventing homelessness?

Kelly Tolhurst: The Government have invested heavily in support for the homeless particularly through the rough sleeping initiative. Liverpool is part of Housing First, which is one of the pilot projects to help rough sleepers, who have multiple complex needs. I hope that the numbers of people moving into that pilot will soon increase in Liverpool. The hon. Gentleman mentions an important point about evictions. It is true that there is a six-month stay on possession proceedings in court to 30 September, and that only the most egregious cases will be taken forward, such as those involving antisocial behaviour and crime. We are committed to that and have made it clear that we do not expect any evictions to take place. If we need to take further action, I am sure that we will find the tools to do so.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): Is it not just so sad when we see homelessness and rough sleeping on our streets? One reason I was so proud to stand as a Conservative party candidate at the last general election was our commitment to eradicate rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament. Homelessness is often seen as an urban issue, but it is very much a rural one as well. Conservative-led Dorset Council has reduced rough sleeping, though, by 39% up until 2019. I suggest to the shadow Secretary of State that maybe she asks the same questions of her own Labour-run Bristol City Council, where homelessness has increased by 20%—

Mr Speaker: Order. First, the question is too long. Secondly, it is not for the Opposition to answer the questions; it is for the Minister. Don't take the Minister's job away—it is not fair to her.

Kelly Tolhurst: You will have to excuse me, Mr Speaker; I fell down the stairs yesterday, so I am struggling to do the bobbing up and down.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I would like to praise the work of Dorset Council, which has been able to continue to reduce rough sleeping. We hope that we will be able to share information with colleagues in other areas to ensure that, where there is great practice and local authorities are taking great steps to reduce rough sleeping and homelessness, the lessons are learned throughout the country. We learnt a lot through the Everyone In programme, and I hope that those lessons will help us to develop policies.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) [V]: As chair of the all-party parliamentary dog advisory welfare group, I have been

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

contacted by Dogs on the Streets, an excellent charity that cares for homeless people who have dogs and are sleeping on the streets. The charity tells me that it is often very difficult for homeless people who are sleeping rough to be admitted into accommodation if they have a pet, particularly a dog. Will the Minister meet me and Dogs on the Streets to talk about the available options? Pets are often a lifeline for people, and we must be extremely compassionate and ensure that those who are compassionate to pets are not left behind on the streets.

Kelly Tolhurst: I will happily meet the hon. Lady to discuss that. She has highlighted an issue that affects not only people sleeping rough but those who are at threat of being made homeless. It transcends the two categories, so I would be happy to discuss it further.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): In December 2019, a report outlined that 216 individuals were being housed in short-term shelters in the Wakefield district. Prior to covid, homelessness and rough sleeping in the district had risen sharply, raising concerns about the safety and wellbeing of those who suffer this plight. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to increase the number of homes available for people who are currently homeless as part of the Government's ambition to end rough sleeping by 2024?

Kelly Tolhurst: The Government are investing more than £150 million in permanent accommodation, delivering 3,300 units, to give an asset to the country that will provide properties for individuals who are sleeping rough and who are then able to come into the system. That is an amazing step forward. It is the biggest investment in this kind of housing since the early '90s, and I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to make that point.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: The Home Office immigration rules published on 22 October make it crystal clear that among the reasons that would normally lead to a refusal of leave to remain in the United Kingdom is failure by the person to accommodate themselves or their dependants without recourse to public funds. Any provision of accommodation for the homeless would be recourse to public funds. My question for the Minister is very simple: what is the advice—be kicked out by the Home Office or freeze on the streets?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I have already outlined, those who have no recourse to public funds do work with local authorities. Local authorities already assess those individuals who are in need and make decisions on whether they can lawfully provide support within that area and for those individuals' needs. It is simply not true to say that we will be removing individuals on the grounds that they are sleeping rough. It is absolutely right that we continue to work with that cohort, as well as with the charities and voluntary organisations across the country that are working with those individuals to establish pathways and provide help with regard to the EU settlement scheme. That work will continue, and I am happy to have further conversations with the hon. Gentleman about that.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for the work she has done in tackling homelessness and rough sleeping, but it has been the west midlands that has led the way in this fight, under the leadership of our Mayor, Andy Street, and his homelessness taskforce, which has seen year-on-year decreases in the number of people rough sleeping. Can she reaffirm that she will indeed work with the West Midlands Combined Authority and our Mayor, Andy Street, to ensure that the lessons they have learned during this process can be carried through to Government, so that we can finally, once and for all, fulfil that manifesto commitment and end rough sleeping?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend and, yes, I totally will. I have already met Andy Street to discuss the issues within the area. I am very grateful for the work that he and others have been leading, such as Jean Templeton from Saint Basils, who has been doing a tremendous job up there, and for the leadership of young people in that area. I look forward to continuing to work with all parts of the country to achieve this ambition.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): In 2019, one in 46 people in Redbridge, which Ilford South is part of, were homeless. That is a shocking statistic. While recent funding is obviously very welcome, I wonder if we can have a situation where I do not have to walk outside Ilford Exchange or outside my constituency office and see once again the many cardboard cities, which so miraculously disappeared, literally in a week, once the Government decided to act and house those homeless people and rough sleepers. Could the Minister ensure that, once lockdown ends, they will uphold their commitment to permanently ending rough sleeping?

Kelly Tolhurst: Actually, I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue in his constituency. It is true, and I am sure I speak for everyone across the House, that every one of us feels sadness and regret when we see any individual sleeping rough in a tent, a box or whatever. It is just not satisfactory. That is why this Government have committed to ending rough sleeping, and why we have put in this unprecedented level of support to achieve that goal. My challenge is to keep working with local authorities to deliver on that promise.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I welcome the funding that my hon. Friend has outlined for councils, including over £1.6 million for Buckinghamshire Council to provide accommodation for people at risk of rough sleeping. Can she confirm how many additional such homes the Government intend to fund by the end of this Parliament?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend, and I am glad that we were able to allocate funding to Buckinghamshire to deliver on those programmes. At the moment—this is our first tranche, obviously—we are delivering 3,300 homes by the end of March 2021 and that is within our commitment to deliver over 6,000. We will continue to work, as I keep repeating—I am sorry, Mr Speaker—with local authorities, because we have to be very clear that each individual area is very different. The drivers, challenges and needs in those areas are so different, as are the needs of the individuals. It is so important that, when

we are announcing these measures and making policy, we are making sure we are delivering policy that does actually achieve the ambitions we want to achieve.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: No one could accuse this Minister of being heartless or uncaring. I know her to be a woman of great integrity. However, I would put it to her that her Government have been in power for a long time now and we still have this real problem of poverty—family poverty—stalking our land. The report by Anne Longfield, the Children’s Commissioner, this morning shows the link between homelessness, rough sleeping and the dreadful way we treat children in care in this country. It is all joined up and there are some common reasons, and I think her Government and her Department should look at that too.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments about me. I always find him to be very compassionate as well. He makes a valid point about the impact that homelessness and poverty can have on young children and particularly children who are leaving care. This is an area that I personally am very passionate about—young people and care leavers. It is true to say that this Government are working across Government. I am working with colleagues across Departments in order to find solutions and develop policies to tackle that and deliver on our ambition.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I commend the Minister for the outstanding work she is doing in her new portfolio. The Passage, a charity based in my constituency working with her Department on the Home for Good model, has seen many people being paired with a mentor in the community where they have been resettled. That has had great success in sustaining tenancies and preventing a return to the streets. Does she agree that it is investment in these types of programmes for preventive work that makes lasting change in the lives of people coming off the streets and that it should continue to be supported?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she has done in this area and the passion that she has for working with me and the Department to tackle this issue. She is absolutely right. It is so important that we are working with local authorities and that money is going to organisations to develop programmes to help with prevention, to deliver support and to provide the mentoring that is so valuable. It is all very well for me as a Minister to stand here today and say what we are doing, but people who have had real-life experience and understand what the reality is are able to impart that and then hold the hand of those individuals who are affected as they navigate the system. That is invaluable.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: In a letter to the Secretary of State in June about rough sleepers during covid-19, community organisations, faith leaders and Ealing Council wrote:

“Without question, the hardest group to support under the current framework is those with no recourse to public funds.”

The Secretary of State’s announcement last week made it clear that the new Protect programme funding was there to ensure that

“everyone sleeping rough on our streets”

has

“somewhere safe to go”.

Could the Minister therefore confirm whether this funding can be used to help those sleeping rough who have no recourse to public funds?

Kelly Tolhurst: The rules on eligibility and immigration status have not changed, including those on no recourse to public funds. It is down to local authorities to use their judgment in assessing the support that they can lawfully give to the individuals. This does already happen. We made it very clear to local authorities in May that, under Next Steps, they were to carry out individual assessments of people who were rough sleeping and take decisions on who they would provide support for. Part of that was providing accommodation to vulnerable people.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome the Everyone In plan and last week’s announcement of the £15 million Protect programme. This morning, I had the opportunity to speak to the new chief executive of Dacorum Borough Council, Claire Hamilton, and she too welcomes the additional funding provided by this Government. However, the concern she wants me to raise with the Minister is that, in two-tier areas like mine, South West Hertfordshire, the money is given to Hertfordshire County Council. Could she use her good offices to ensure that the money is given to the frontline as quickly as possible?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I will use my position to make sure that that money is being targeted at and provided in the areas where it is actually needed. This package is all about being able to target work intensively with local authorities. This is an offer to all Members who have a particular issue at a local level: I am always happy to take that up with local authorities and to have further discussions on their behalf.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister to her post. I think she is the 12th Minister in this position in the past decade. Her enthusiasm for the efficacy of Government policy would be infectious but for the detailed work on the Government’s housing policies we have been doing on the Public Accounts Committee, which I commend to her. We are talking a lot about rough sleeping today, but I have far more families who are hidden homeless, or two households in one. They are struggling through the pandemic. It is a public health issue and it is damaging our children. Will she consider talking to me and my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and me about a housing market package to buy up hard-to-sell properties in the private sector and provide these people and rough sleepers with the Move On accommodation they so desperately need?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I am always happy to meet her to discuss particular issues affecting her area and to listen to ideas that Members think may or may not work in their local setting, but I have to reiterate that London has had significant support with the Next Steps accommodation. The exact focus of that is to move those individuals out

[Kelly Tolhurst]

of temporary emergency accommodation and into longer-term stability and pathways, delivering that security that those individuals and families need. I will happily meet her to discuss that further.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): I start by thanking this Government, who have supported 29,000 people who have been rough sleeping this year alone. I have only a handful of rough sleepers in my constituency—a handful too many—but I thank the Government for finding secure accommodation for them during the pandemic, helping to protect lives and prevent the spread of the virus. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking local charities in my Stourbridge constituency such as Leslie's Care Packages, which works tirelessly to ensure that rough sleepers have the support they need?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend, and I happily pass on my thanks to the charities and the organisation in her constituency, Leslie's Care Packages, for the work they have been doing throughout the pandemic. Again, I extend my thanks to all in the charitable sector and the voluntary sector, who have done such a lot of work in this area, working constructively with the Government and local authorities to ensure that we are targeting support to those individuals who need the help the most.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab) [V]: In the spring, the Everyone In programme showed that where there is the political will, it is possible to take action to provide shelter for people who need it, but that should not be done only in emergencies; it should be done all year round, guaranteeing safe and warm shelter to everyone who needs it, including those with no recourse to public funds. Rather than wasting hundreds of millions of pounds on covid contracts for friends and family of the Conservative party, will the Government instead provide permanent funding to end homelessness for good?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady will know that part of our follow-on from the Everyone In programme—it is still ongoing and has not stopped—is the Next Steps funding, which delivers exactly what she is asking. It is providing not only funding for local authorities to deliver that next stage, move-on accommodation, but £150 million of investment in permanent accommodation—the largest investment in delivering homes in this area since the '90s.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): In Cornwall, homelessness and rough sleeping has historically been an issue. In recent years, some excellent work has been done in Cornwall to combat the issue by St Petrocs and by the local authority, particularly with the success of the recent Pydar Pop UP project in Truro. Of course more needs to be done, and I welcome the £5.5 million that the Government have provided to Cornwall Council since September to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. It is a substantial amount of money that creates a real opportunity to end rough sleeping in Cornwall. However, does my hon. Friend agree that that money needs to be spent on long-term solutions to find homes for those who are homeless and rough sleeping, not just on the short term and quick fixes?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The investment we are making as a Government in long-term secure homes is so important. That is what the Secretary of State and I are driving to achieve, within the realms of the funding, and we are seeing delivery across the country. We are committed to working with local authorities, including Cornwall, to understand the specific challenges. As I have said, every area is slightly different and sometimes there is a different solution for every area. We have to understand those things so that we can work effectively with the local authorities so that they can deliver that change and we can achieve our objectives.

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

Point of Order

1.34 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 13 October, I submitted a named day written question to the Cabinet Office on whether contractor relief identical to that set out in procurement policy note 02/20 would be given from 31 October, given the ongoing covid outbreak. Nearly a month later, I still have not received a response, and I submitted a named day written question on 5 November asking when my initial named day written question would be answered, but I still have not had a response to that. So, Madam Deputy Speaker, please can you advise me on how I can elicit a response from the Minister for the Cabinet Office on this really important issue?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am very concerned to hear what the hon. Lady has to say, and I suspect from my own experience as a constituency Member of Parliament that a great many Members around the House are having the same experience as the hon. Lady. [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes."] I see that almost everyone present in the Chamber is showing their assent. Mr Speaker has made it clear on several previous occasions that Departments must do better in answering questions from hon. Members. We all appreciate that many people are having to work from home and in rather more difficult circumstances than usual, but it should not be wrong of us to expect a certain degree of efficiency from professional civil servants, so the delay to which the hon. Lady refers is unsatisfactory.

I am sure that those on the Government Front Bench will have heard the hon. Lady's concerns, my concerns, Mr Speaker's concerns and the echo all around the Chamber of almost every hon. Member: this is happening far too often. The hon. Lady may wish to write to the

Leader of the House, and I certainly, in answering this question right now, hope to draw the attention of the Leader of the House to this predicament.

The Leader of the House said in answer to a question from the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter):

"Named day questions must be answered within the named day period...and questions should be being dealt with in timely fashion."—[*Official Report*, 5 November 2020; Vol. 693, c. 495.]

I am quite sure that the Leader of the House will be cognisant of the fact that almost every Member of this place shares the experience that the hon. Lady has just described and that he will take steps to ensure that his ministerial colleagues answer their questions in a timely fashion and that those who are supposed to support them do so efficiently.

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 item of business, I will suspend the House for three minutes.

1.37 pm

Sitting suspended.

BILL PRESENTED

NATIONAL SECURITY AND INVESTMENT

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Alok Sharma, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Dominic Raab, Secretary Priti Patel, Michael Gove, Secretary Ben Wallace, Secretary Liz Truss, Secretary Oliver Dowden and Nadhim Zahawi, presented a Bill to make provision for the making of orders in connection with national security risks arising from the acquisition of control over certain types of entities and assets; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 210) with explanatory notes (Bill 210-EN).

Supported Housing (Regulation)

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

1.41 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to regulate supported housing; to make provision about local authority oversight and the enforcement of standards of accommodation and support in supported housing; to prohibit the placing of children in care in unregulated accommodation; and for connected purposes.

We quite rightly in this country have a regulatory system in place for care homes through the Care Quality Commission. In Scotland, as I understand it, the Care Commission also covers supported housing. I am calling for the same to happen in England for hostels, refuges and other accommodation for people with support needs, so that vulnerable people are housed only in decent, safe accommodation where they will get the support they need and where unscrupulous landlords will no longer be able to exploit them to make a quick buck through the housing benefit system.

I stress that there are many respectable, decent providers of supported housing out there, and I appreciate that theirs is not an easy job. In particular, I pay tribute to the work they have done during this pandemic, with local authorities, to house rough sleepers. Sadly, however, not all providers are like that. Because the local housing allowance is so low in places like Bristol, for some private landlords with an eye to profit, renting at the usual rates has little appeal when, if they convert to supported housing, they can charge much more. They only have to provide a level of support that is “more than minimal” to qualify for an exemption that can get them the enhanced rates of housing benefit that make it so attractive to them.

The situation at Wick House, a large supported housing project in my constituency, is why I got involved, in particular the death of residents—there have been seven deaths since a particular charity began running the place—and in particular the deaths of George Mahoney, whose body was found in a pool of blood in 2016, and Paul Way, who died in 2017 and whose body, despite it being supported accommodation, was not found for three days.

One former worker at the hostel shared with me emails he sent to George’s family after his death in which he describes the living conditions. He talks about visible bed bugs on residents. He said that the Salvation Army would fumigate the kit of anyone coming from Wick House. He spoke of the “employment of career criminals”, the victimisation of vulnerable residents and his concern for women living there, saying:

“there is quite a lot of sexual activity in a drunken/drugged and prostituted state.”

He described a “woeful” lack of support: a visit once a fortnight from a local drugs project and from a mental health team for certain residents, but that was it. He also said—I stress this was back in 2017—that the management

“can’t claim not to know about it—they are facilitating it. I don’t really care whether this is deliberate or accidental, it’s still happening and it needs to be stopped, not ignored.”

What many of us came to realise, however, was how little power anyone had to stop them. When a council commissions supported housing, control can be exercised

through the contract, but with such an uncommissioned service, Bristol Council was really limited in what it could do. The council did refuse to refer people to Wick House, and both it and I urged prison and probation services to do likewise, but Wick House did not find it difficult to fill its rooms with self-referrals and referrals from outside the local area.

In 2017, the landlord attempted to increase the rent from £125 to £343 per tenant, resulting in tribunal proceedings in which the judge, by consent order, reduced it to £170. The management responded by expanding Wick House from 47 residents to 87, cramming them in to recoup the lost income. Even though Wick House was in breach of planning rules, the council still had to pay housing benefit for all 87 tenants regardless, and tried to enforce measures on the breach.

In September 2019, the Charity Commission published a report on Bristol Sheltered Accommodation & Support—the charity that ran Wick House. It found a failure to report serious incidents, including the death of a resident; unauthorised salary payments to trustees; poor financial controls; and unmanaged conflicts of interest. A new charity is now running Wick House. At the time, the Charity Commission warned that the investigations had brought to light wider issues around the regulation of supported housing that limited its ability to hold charities providing such accommodation to account.

It is quite clear that this is not an isolated case, and many colleagues have expressed similar concerns, particularly in cities. In September this year, *The Sunday Telegraph* published a piece on suburban family homes that were being converted into unlicensed bail hostels—again, the motivation was landlords wanting to get their hands on higher housing-benefit payments. The article said:

“Such family homes contain a volatile mix of ex-prisoners, drug addicts, those with severe mental health issues, refugees and women fleeing domestic abuse.”

Bail hostels that are classed as approved premises are tightly regulated, but their unregulated equivalents are not, and providers can often get away with little to no supervision or support. The West Midlands police and crime commissioner said:

“Regulation needs to come from central government. At the moment, the law is quite free and easy around these areas. Some of these landlords are actually criminals who are making money out of people’s misery.”

The Bill seeks to protect young people. The recent report, “Unregulated”, by the Children’s Commissioner, revealed that 12,800 children in care—or one in eight—spent some time in an unregulated placement that was not registered with Ofsted in 2018-19. They are usually older teens, but there are some under-16s and children with high needs. They are housed in independent or semi-independent accommodation with limited support that is not regulated by the quality inspectorate. The accommodation might be a flat, hostel or bedsit. Even worse, in some cases, it might be a caravan, tent or barge. Children who are supposedly in care are left to fend for themselves with limited support from key workers—perhaps five hours a week or fewer. Young people use words such as “disgusting”, “absolutely terrible” and “like a prison cell” to describe their living arrangements. In some instances, they end up living alongside vulnerable adults, who have their own difficulties, or in placements where they are exposed to the risk of exploitation and

other negative influences. The Children’s Commissioner has called for the use of semi-independent and independent provision to be made illegal for all children in care and for the regulation of unregulated settings. That is included the scope of the Bill.

There has been growing awareness in recent years, but little action. In May 2017, for example, in a joint report on the future of supported housing, the Select Committees on Housing Communities and Local Government and on Work and Pensions recommended that the Government should establish a set of national standards to enable monitoring of quality provision in all supported housing in England and Wales. They said that all providers should be registered with a local authority, whether or not their services had been commissioned locally, and that local authorities should undertake annual inspections of all supported housing schemes in their area to ensure a minimum standard of provision.

In response, the Government committed to working with local authorities on how they might best ensure decent and appropriate standards. Very little happened until three years later. Last month, on 20 October, we suddenly saw some movement from the Government. Five pilots in priority areas—Birmingham, Hull, Blackpool, Blackburn and Bristol—will be funded to the tune of £3 million for collaborative working between local partners to test different approaches on greater oversight and enforcement of higher standards in non-commissioned provision. That has been accompanied by the publication of a statement of national expectations that focuses on accommodation.

I am pleased that Bristol was chosen for one of the pilot schemes, and that the Government recognise the good work that Bristol City Council has done. The funding will give the council the opportunity to carry out a quality check on the city’s non-commissioned sector involving a team from environmental health, safeguarding, support review officers and housing benefits to help identify the problems and take what enforcement action we can. However, for reasons I have already set out, I have my doubts about whether a voluntary approach is enough. Local authorities do not have sufficient powers to enforce standards—which are only expected

standards, anyway—and while many decent providers will be happy to co-operate, those in it purely for the money will not do so.

Jess Turtle, co-founder of the Museum of Homelessness, recently told *The Big Issue* that the new measures were “nowhere near” enough. She said that

“40% of the deaths we recorded in 2019 occurred when a person was in emergency or temporary accommodation, and our research clearly shows these tragedies will continue without real action”.

She questioned whether providers would really take time to follow recommended guidelines and was concerned that private landlords and providers, who account for 86% of the £1.1 billion temporary accommodation industry, had not even been identified as supported housing providers in the policy. I think the Government—or at least some Ministers—recognise the flaws in the voluntary approach and view the pilots, which run only for six months, as an evidence-gathering exercise, which I hope will inform future regulation.

I have had Ministers from three different Departments acknowledge in one way or another the need to address the concerns I have raised. I am meeting two more Ministers, including the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), who is in her place today, before the end of the month to discuss what can be done. Across the Atlantic, we have seen a new expression of a desire for bipartisan working in difficult times and, despite our many differences across the House, people would want to see the same approach from us on an issue such as this.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Kerry McCarthy, Mr Clive Betts, Shabana Mahmood, Steve McCabe, Bob Blackman, Helen Hayes, Fleur Anderson, Tim Loughton, Andrew Selous, Mohammad Yasin, Munira Wilson and Andrew Gwynne present the Bill.

Kerry McCarthy accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read the Second time on Friday 15 January, and to be printed (Bill 212).

Remembrance, UK Armed Forces and Society

[Relevant documents: e-petition 332503, entitled Enshrine the Military Covenant in UK Law; Eleventh Report of the Defence Committee, Session 2017-19, Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2018, HC 1899, and the Government Response, First Special Report of the Committee, HC 162; and Oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee on 22 April 2020 on introductory Session with the Defence Secretary, HC 295, on 7 July 2020 on work of the Chief of the Defence Staff, HC 594, and on 13 October 2020 on work of the Service Complaints Ombudsman, HC 881, and written evidence from the Service Complaints Ombudsman, HC 881.]

1.51 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heappey):

I beg to move,

That this House has considered remembrance, UK armed forces and society.

It is a real honour for me to open the debate not only as the Minister for the Armed Forces in the Ministry of Defence but as someone who has served on four operational tours to Iraq, Afghanistan and Northern Ireland. I hope that, at the end of my remarks, the House will indulge me in some personal reflections on the meaning of remembrance.

Before that, I want to draw your attention, Madam Deputy Speaker, to the call list for the debate, which would make for a formidable half-company, should the nation ever call on us. The number of colleagues in the House who have served underlines the affinity between this place and our nation's armed forces. A Defence Minister can often reflect on how the partisan hullabaloo of other areas of policy rarely encroaches on how we debate defence in this place. I know, as someone who served in at least two operational theatres that caused some political disagreement, that it really matters that this place not only robustly debates how and where we use our armed forces, but does so always in a tone that makes those doing this place's bidding in dangerous and dusty places realise that everybody in this House has the interests of our armed forces at heart, even when we disagree on how best to use them. I therefore look forward to another characteristically respectful and constructive debate.

It is an honour to take part in this debate on Armistice Day. This is a particularly significant year for remembrance. We are commemorating a century on from the installation of the Cenotaph, and we are marking 100 years since the interring of the unknown warrior in Westminster Abbey. That soldier represents the multitudes who gave their lives in the great war: a soldier buried

“among the kings because he had done good toward God and toward His house”.

Of course, this year we are also celebrating 75 years since the end of world war two.

Inevitably, due to covid, we have had to mark remembrance differently. On Sunday, instead of tens of thousands marching past the Cenotaph, just 26 veterans took part. Instead of people congregating on Whitehall in their thousands, the streets were quiet and still. The remembrance ceremony that I attended in my constituency this year was in Burnham-on-Sea. We attended in small

numbers, I with the chairman of the Royal British Legion; at 9 am we laid our wreath, followed shortly afterwards by a group of councillors.

I actually thought it was quite poignant that things should be remembered in that way, but it also meant, for the first time in a long time for many of us, that we were at home at 11 o'clock and able to watch on television the coverage of the ceremony at the Cenotaph. It was the first time I had seen it for a number of years, and I congratulate all those who put together such a poignant and reflective ceremony worthy of the magnitude of that occasion, while respecting the constraints that we are under because of covid. For all that we bash the BBC, particularly from the Government side of the House, I thought that it got both its coverage and its commentary spot-on on Sunday.

It was also important, I thought, that we had a moment of remembrance this morning in the House. I know that the nation will have looked to us, as well as to the Cenotaph on Whitehall and to Westminster Abbey, for leadership at this important moment in the year. It was great to see that marked here in the Chamber.

There are three points that I want to make today: our appreciation of the support our armed forces receive from the public at large, from the service charities, and from the Royal British Legion in particular; our admiration for the service of those who continue to put their lives on the line in the defence of our great nation; and our reverence for those who have made the ultimate sacrifice so that we may enjoy our freedom.

When I was in Afghanistan and Iraq, every time we received a delivery of mail, there would be all the mail from our family and friends but there would also be hundreds of letters and parcels from people with no connection to the armed forces beyond their admiration for what young men and women were willing to go away to do. I can tell the House that when we were in remote operating bases, as I was in Sangin, the fact that somebody had taken the time to write a letter to a soldier they did not know, or to send some biscuits or sweets, meant an enormous amount. It reminds our armed forces always just how close they are to our nation's hearts.

We have seen that ourselves in our constituencies over the last few months, where soldiers, sailors, airmen, airwomen and marines have been delivering testing centres, delivering personal protective equipment to the local hospital or, earlier in the year, stuffing sandbags. I can tell the House how much it means to our men and women when members of the community just go up to them and say, “Thank you. Well done. You're doing a great job.” People do that, unprompted, because they admire those who wear the uniform of our armed forces in the service of our nation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister refers to what happened in Afghanistan—the letters and things that went there. Seven years ago, I had the opportunity to represent my party in Afghanistan in meeting the Royal Irish Regiment. I knew their love of Tayto potato crisps, so I took lots of them with me and gave them out to the soldiers, both male and female, who were there. That brought them close to home, and that is really important when they are in Afghanistan serving their Queen and country.

James Heappey: The hon. Member is a keen supporter of our armed forces, and I can tell him that the great pleasure of serving in his beautiful corner of the world, as I have done, is not the stunning landscape or the Bushmills, but the Tayto chips in our packed lunches on the ranges.

Beyond the support of the community are our amazing service charities. So many of them do great work for our armed forces all year round, but at this time of year it is particularly important to reflect on the contribution of the Royal British Legion and the importance of its poppy appeal. It is an amazing commitment from poppy collectors all over the country that normally they go out in all weathers, from dawn till dusk, to sell poppies wherever they can. This year, of course, they have been more limited in what they have been able to do, but again and again I have seen in my constituency, and I know colleagues will have seen likewise, that they have done everything they can—within the law—to get out and raise as much money as they can for this important cause. We are all hugely grateful to them for doing so. I know that we would all want anybody watching today's proceedings or reflecting on the fact that today is Armistice Day and they are yet to get their poppy to know that there is still time and that their money makes a real difference, in looking after both the families of those who have given their lives in conflict and those who have been forever scarred by their service.

That leads me to the service of our armed forces and the unlimited liability that they accept in the service of our nation—to do anything, anywhere, at any time, if this House and Her Majesty's Government will it. That is an extraordinary thing to sign up and do. Some of us have done it for a few years. Some of us have done it for entire careers. Some of us have not done it at all, but to those who continue to serve, what matters is not whether a person has served, but that they pause and reflect that as they go on with their life, and as their family are leading their lives, those who serve have accepted a responsibility on behalf of the nation to drop everything and leave at any moment to go and do whatever the nation requires anywhere in the world. That is an amazing act of selflessness that we should all be grateful for.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister talks about years of service. I wonder whether he would commend and congratulate my constituent, Mrs Barbara McGregor, who is due to retire in January next year after 44 years of service in the Royal Navy to Queen and country. Mrs McGregor is taking part in Armistice services this week, and she was meant to be leading the parade march in the Bridgend county borough this weekend but was not able to. Would the Minister commend her and congratulate her on her service, and on the fact that she has put everything—Queen and country—as a sole focus of her entire service in the Navy?

James Heappey: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman's constituent on the longevity of her service and remark on what an amazing lifetime of commitment that is, with all the moments for her family, within her community and for her friends that she missed because she put her service of our country first. It is a quite extraordinary commitment, and I commend the hon. Gentleman for raising it in the House this afternoon.

Over the last few months, I have had the opportunity to see fast jet pilots serving in different corners of the European theatre, going out on missions where split-second decisions can be the difference between mission success and catastrophe. I visited helicopter crews in Mali operating in austere conditions, where it is dusty and dangerous and it is pretty hard to keep the Chinooks flying. I have seen air transport squadrons flying day after day and night after night to maintain the extraordinary efforts of our nation's armed forces around the globe. I have seen troops operating in Estonia, Iraq and Afghanistan, and others on Salisbury Plain preparing for a new deployment to Mali next month. I have seen training teams, big and small, working with our partners around the world.

The Royal Navy has had ships recently in the Barents sea, the Black sea, the eastern Mediterranean, the Caribbean, the Atlantic, the Gulf and the Indian ocean. Our sailors and Royal Marines right now are responding to the humanitarian disaster that has followed in the wake of recent hurricanes in the Caribbean. We are rebuilding our sovereign carrier strike capability, and yesterday, I had the enormous honour of seeing the awe-inspiring work of Her Majesty's Submarine Service, who keep our continuous at-sea deterrent hidden from view—silent but utterly deadly, and non-stop for 51 years.

That would just be business as usual for Defence, but this year, there has been an extraordinary contribution in supporting the Government's response to covid as well. As we emerge from the covid crisis, there is an expectation that instability will follow in its wake, so our armed forces can look forward to even more activity in even more uncertain parts of the world, reassuring our allies, deterring our adversaries, demonstrating our resolve to uphold a rules-based international system and destroying those who mean us harm when they have to.

There are also a vast number of people who have served in our nation's armed forces and who we must now look after as veterans. I pay tribute to the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), for all the work that he does in that regard. Our veterans community matters enormously. They are an important part of the moral component of fighting power. If you are serving in the armed forces now, your confidence to act decisively on behalf of the nation is motivated by how you see the nation supporting its veterans back at home at that time. You want to know that if you get hurt, or take a decision, the Government and the nation will stand behind you for the rest of your life, and that is a commitment that this Government are proud to make.

Finally, sacrifice. Last week I was in Egypt visiting HMS Albion, which was in Alexandria after a successful deployment to the eastern Mediterranean. While I was up on the north coast of Egypt, I went to the cemetery at El Alamein. Like all Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries, it was immaculately maintained. It was vast, and all over it were grouped graves, which I understand is symptomatic of an armoured battle where entire tank crews or armoured personnel carrier crews died in one go. Very often their remains were almost impossible to separate, so they were buried with four or five headstones immediately adjacent to one another. That makes one pause and reflect on the horror of a battle of that intensity.

[James Heapey]

Then, as in so many other Commonwealth war graves cemeteries around the world, there were the unmarked graves of those—we will never know exactly who they were—who lie now beneath foreign soil to be remembered anonymously for all time. Then there were the Commonwealth graves, thousands of them, reminding us that this was an effort not just from all corners of the United Kingdom but from all corners of the Commonwealth. It was pleasing, therefore, to see that in Commonwealth war graves cemeteries around the world and in our embassies and high commissions on Sunday, there were moments of remembrance to reflect on the sacrifice of so many from other countries in the defence of our great nation.

This year, marking 75 years since the end of the second world war, has been a great opportunity for us to reflect not only on victory in Europe but on victory in Japan. That Pacific campaign is so often the one that is spoken about less, yet the acts of heroism and derring-do were no less important. Indeed, in many of the stories I have heard, the deprivation was far greater because of the environment in which the forces were operating. Since then, brave servicemen and women from the United Kingdom have given their lives in Korea, the Falklands, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Sierra Leone, Iraq and Afghanistan. It is on those last two conflicts that I have my own personal reflections.

When you join up, you know there is a risk that the moment might come when you have to put yourself in a position where you might lose your life. When you stand there at Sandhurst, Dartmouth, Cranwell, Catterick or HMS Raleigh and the flag is there and the Queen is on the wall and the Bible is put in your hand, you are filled with confidence that you are on a career path that is worthy and great, but when you are behind a wall and the rounds are hitting the other side or an improvised explosive device has just gone off and you know that you have to stand up close with the enemy and do your duty, that is a moment when you realise a lot about yourself. It is also a moment, sadly, from which people do not always return, and their loss is something that I feel keenly every time I pause and reflect on my experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I know that for the entire veterans community there will be a face that is in their minds when the Last Post is blown and the two minutes' silence is followed. In communities across the country, there will be people who are remembered because they were there one month and then, six months later when their friends and comrades returned, there were no longer there. They were just a name on a war memorial. Those names are lives cut down in their prime and as we pause, over Remembrance Weekend and on Armistice Day today, let us never forget that they turned up at a recruiting office and embarked on their military careers, believing that what they were going to do would make a difference for our country and protect our freedom. They knew in the back of their minds that perhaps they might be called upon to give their lives, but they hoped and even expected that it would never be them. Hundreds of thousands have answered our nation's call and given their lives in doing so. We will remember them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the spokesman for the Opposition, I thank the Minister for his brevity in his opening speech. It will be

obvious that there are over 50 colleagues trying to catch my eye, and that we have only three hours for this debate. I therefore have to start with a time limit on Back Bench speeches of six minutes. That will be reduced later in the debate, and people who are further down the list must recognise the reality that they are unlikely to be called, but I am happy to call John Healey.

2.10 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have to say that it is an honour to follow the Minister and his moving speech this afternoon, and I pay tribute to him for his four tours of duty and his decade of service in the Rifles, just as I pay tribute to the service that other hon. Members in all parts of this House have given to our armed forces. Parliament is all the better for Members who have committed themselves to service in the forces, and this House is also all the better for the service of Members who are committed to the forces. I look forward to the contributions to this afternoon's debate of many of those hon. Members who are on the long call list.

This is indeed the moment we commemorate, as we did this morning in this Chamber, the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, when hostilities ceased in 1918. It is the focus of our national remembrance each year: the moment the nation comes together to honour those who have served, those who have fought to keep us safe, and above all, those who have made the ultimate sacrifice with their lives so that the rest of us may continue to enjoy the freedoms we do today. The Minister put it far more eloquently than many of the rest of us can, but the men and women who wear a British military uniform make a unique commitment to, if needed, put themselves in harm's way to protect the rest of us. I want this day's debate to recall not just the lives of those lost in the two world wars, but those of the 7,190 UK service personnel who have died in operations since 1945.

I was reminded of this on Sunday, when I, like the Minister, was proud to lay a wreath alongside the president of our local British Legion branch in Rotherham. His name is Ron Moffett; he served for more than 20 years in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, and he talked to me of comrades he had lost in Northern Ireland, in the Falklands, in Afghanistan, and in Germany in training. I want in my relatively brief remarks to concentrate on the ordinary servicemen and women: on their extraordinary sense of duty, and on our duty, in turn, to them.

The Minister was right to say that remembrance has a particular poignancy this year. During 2020, we have marked 75 years since the end of the second world war—VE Day and VJ Day—and 80 years since the battle of Britain, and we have all been forced to find new ways to remember: ways that are perhaps more private, but no less important and no less personal. This year, we have also seen the hallmark values that have been there in generations of our forces personnel come to the fore again, as our troops have stood alongside frontline workers in the fight against the covid virus. I have said to the Defence Secretary that during this new national lockdown in England and the national vaccination challenge ahead, if the Government are willing to make further use of our forces in this fight, they will have our full support and strong backing from the public. The

system that we have of military assistance to civil authorities is sound. It has been used 341 times for covid help since mid-March and 41 agreements are still in place, but people want to know now what the plan is. They have a right to know, and they also have a right to regular ministerial reporting on such decisions. I say to the Minister that I hope he and his colleagues will do this, because it will also help better understanding and better support for our military.

The Chief of the Defence Staff was right when he said recently that this should worry us all. He said that the level of understanding about our armed forces is at “an unprecedented low.” That is borne out by research that the British Forces Broadcasting Service published in June, which confirmed that 68% of the population do not know what the military actually do when they are not in combat. One third had no idea that our military play a part in thwarting terrorism or dealing with the aftermath of floods, and 53% believe that they use battle tanks to get around on a daily basis.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Sounds good to me.

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman is harking back to the days when perhaps he did use battle tanks on a daily basis, but I think we are a little short of tanks to go round these days.

On a serious point, the number of veterans in society is set to fall by a third during this decade. It is clear to me that we must do more at all levels to reinforce our country’s understanding of and commitment to our armed forces.

On cadets, community cadet numbers have been falling and we cannot just rely on private schools. We can do more to reinvest in more community cadet forces. We now rely more on the professional expertise and skills of reservists, but the numbers are still below target, and we can do more to make recruitment better and employer support stronger.

On resilience, the covid pandemic has demonstrated that national resilience is an important part of national defence, and we can do more to strengthen Britain’s total deterrence, with large-scale joint civil, corporate and military exercises. On veterans, the Office for Veterans’ Affairs was a welcome step last year, but we can do more to make the UK the best place to be a veteran by enshrining the armed forces covenant in law. I say constructively and respectfully to the Minister that if the Government are willing to take those steps, they will have our full support to do so.

In this debate, we rightly celebrate the national pride we have in our military personnel, full-time and reservist. They are respected around the world for their professionalism and their all-round excellence, but I say again constructively and respectfully that if Ministers talk up our armed forces, they must also account for the declines there have been in the past decade or two. Since 2010, our full-time forces numbers are down by 40,000. Our military has never been smaller since we fought Napoleon 200 years ago. Forces pay is down, forces recruitment is down and forces morale is down. One in four military personnel now say they plan to quit before the end of their contract.

In 2015, the strategic defence review, in 89 pages, devoted just one and a half pages to personnel. Just like the 2010 defence review, it was largely a cover for cuts,

which is why our armed forces are nearly 12,000 short of the strength promised in that 2015 review. It is why essential equipment, from new tanks to the radar system to protect our new aircraft carriers, is long overdue, and it is why our defence budget has a £13 billion black hole.

The Defence Secretary has rightly said that previous reviews

“failed because they were never in step with the spending plans”.—
[*Official Report*, 6 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 647.]

Both sides of the House recognise that the Chancellor cut the ground from under the Defence Secretary when he postponed this year’s comprehensive spending review, but we also know that our adversaries will not pause. They confront us with continuous and constantly developing threats that no longer conform to any distinction between peace and war and are no longer confined to the land, sea and air domains of conventional warfare. So the Government’s integrated review is needed now more than ever.

As we move, as the Defence Secretary has put it, from “industrial age” to “information age” warfare, we must never neglect one fact: at the heart of our defence and security remain our forces personnel. Autonomous weapons, artificial intelligence and robotics will all become more and more widespread in the years ahead, but the essential utility of the men and women of our armed forces will remain central. Whether it is the frontline forces personnel doing city-wide covid testing in Liverpool or the special forces who took back control of the Nave Andromeda in the English channel last month, these are only the most recent reminders that although high-tech systems are essential, our highly trained British troops are indispensable. When the Chief of the Defence Staff launched our important new military doctrine, the military integrated operating concept, in September, he stressed that it

“emphasises the importance of our people—who have always been, and always will be, our adaptive edge.”

We honour them and we remember them.

2.21 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. Defence is a subject that we do not discuss enough, so I suspect that, just as the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) said, we will wander away from giving gratitude to those in the past and look at some future challenges. I am pleased to see my fellow Rifleman, the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), in his place. The whole House joins him in saying thank you to our gallant, brave warriors, who have defended our shores, skies and interests over the years. It is important that despite the pandemic, we are able to continue to say thank you.

We pay tribute to those in the past, whom we all appreciate. I recall sitting on my grandfather’s knee when he explained the first world war medals that he had been awarded. That created a bond with me that has never gone away. It perhaps influenced me in stepping forward, wanting to serve. That link between myself and those in the armed forces is different from that between society and our armed forces today, as our armed forces have shrunk. We have seen vivid illustrations of some perceptions of what they now do, so part of what we are doing today is about educating the next

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

generation on the importance and value that we in Britain bestow on our armed forces, which is perhaps uniquely different from what happens in other countries around the world.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): On the work that our armed forces do today—other Members have mentioned their immense contribution during the covid crisis—will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the British Army units based in Wiltshire, on Salisbury Plain, in my constituency, which is of course the home of the British Army, despite what my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) might like to say? Would my right hon. Friend also welcome, as I would, a welcome home parade, which might be organised by the Houses of Parliament, for soldiers once the covid crisis is behind us, to honour troops who have contributed to tackling it, just as we honour the contributions of troops who have been deployed overseas?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for that intervention, and I was pleased to see the Minister nodding as my hon. Friend was speaking. That is exactly what we did with troops returning from Afghanistan and it is another way to engage with the public. I do not dare go down this avenue too much, but in reporting the great work being done in Liverpool the BBC had to give a health warning and say, “You are about to see images of armed forces on the streets in Liverpool. Please do not be worried.” That is a testimony to how much work we need to do to change the culture that is building up in this country.

On the pandemic, I am afraid that I do concur with the view, as I said yesterday, that, while the military is doing fantastic work across the country with regard to logistics, transport and so forth, it is an under-utilised asset when it comes to emergency planning, crisis management and strategic thinking. Some of the decisions that have been made by this Government have, I am afraid, been clunky. The best decision makers and strategists that we have are in the Ministry of Defence, yet there is not a military person to be seen in the quad, the top decision-making body dealing with this pandemic.

On the issue of veterans, which came up in Prime Minister's questions, I simply underline the pressure that our service charities are currently facing. One fifth of them may go out of business by Christmas. They are not able to raise the funds that they need. We will be breaching the armed forces covenant unless we are able to provide that support. I hope the Prime Minister is listening. It is something that I raised at the Liaison Committee. It is so important to recognise that, from their own surveys, mental health issues have increased by 75% and loneliness by 70%. These are issues that we need to embrace and recognise.

We can all see that, internationally, we are in a very interesting place. We have a United States that is now waking up to recognise that it needs to improve its global leadership. We need to be in the room as that happens, because, over the past 10 years, there has been a demise in terms of what the west stands for, what we believe in and what we are willing to defend and our wily adversaries, not least China, have taken advantage of that. We have not even had our integrated review yet. We do not even know what we stand for, what we

believe in, and where we want to go. Please, Minister, and I know you believe this yourself, get that integrated review done. We cannot even work out how many tanks or aeroplanes we will have, let alone our going over to the United States to say that our thought leadership is the best in the world, our soft power is the best in the world. It will not take us seriously unless we complete that review and it is fully funded. I make the case—Madam Deputy Speaker, I can see that you are already looking at me in that way—that this is a day when we say thank you to our armed forces for the past and a day, I hope, when all of us will be resolute in defending, supporting and urging the Ministers on to say, “Let's invest in the future of our armed forces”, so that we can be as proud of them in the future as we have been in the past.

2.28 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), the Chair of the Defence Committee. It is also an honour to speak in today's debate on behalf of the Scottish National party. I want to start by placing on record our grateful thanks to all service personnel for their commitment to defending these islands.

Like many other hon. Members, I marked Remembrance Sunday in my own constituency at the weekend. In Parkhead, the Eastern Necropolis includes the graves of 76 soldiers who died in the first world war and of 32 soldiers who died in the second world war. These 108 graves of soldiers serve as a reminder to me of the brave men and women who sacrificed their lives to fight for us to live in a peaceful and tolerant society. Although those soldiers were laid to rest in Glasgow, many soldiers did not, of course, return home. A total of 134,712 Scottish men and women died in world war one. According to the most recent assessment, 26% of all Scots who went abroad in the war effort did not return to Scotland. We are unified in remembrance of the selflessness, heroism and the personal sacrifices endured by millions during and since world war one.

In remembering the horrors of the first and second world wars, we should reaffirm their commitment to peace, fairness and the rule of law. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) is currently stuck in Committee at the moment so cannot be here, but she wanted to place on record her thanks to the Bridgeton Cross VC memorial group to remember Private Henry May, who rescued two comrades under machine gun fire, as well as others lost from the local community.

While remembering the past, we must also consider what support we currently provide for our service personnel and veterans across the UK, many of whom face an array of challenges from mental ill health to homelessness. I am privileged to have a top-class Scottish Veterans' Residence complex in my constituency in Cranhill, and it is an honour for me to be wearing their tie for today's debate. However, as politicians, it is our responsibility to ensure that when veterans return to civilian life in our communities, they are supported through this transition. We know that service personnel are more likely to suffer from problems surrounding mental health, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder. Indeed, 6% of all ex-military personnel suffer from PTSD. Mental health support must be made readily available for all, without any judgment or stigma attached—I hear that message time and again at my bespoke veterans' surgery in Cranhill.

Last year, the No Homeless Veterans campaign identified 3,500 veterans who were experiencing homelessness, either sofa-surfing, living in temporary accommodation or even sleeping rough. As the SNP spokesperson for housing in this place, I believe it is important to highlight this ever-present issue and to ensure that no veteran experiences homelessness.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I commend what the hon. Gentleman is saying and thank the many local authorities that are putting veterans at the top of their list of people prioritised for council housing. Reading Borough Council has done so and I encourage other local authorities to do the same. It is important that we respect veterans in that way and provide them with the homes that they need once they have finished their service.

David Linden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments and commend the support that has been provided by Reading Borough Council. At this juncture, I also pay tribute to Phil Greene, formerly of Glasgow City Council in my own patch, who has done a sterling job on that issue as well.

Combat Stress, the UK's leading mental health charity for former servicemen and women, found that service personnel were waiting until their 60s to receive help for alcohol and substance abuse. With understandable pride deterring former service personnel, many delay seeking the help that they need.

I am proud of all the work that the SNP-led Scottish Government are doing to support ex-service personnel across Scotland, including the appointment of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner—the first person to hold such a position in the UK. The Scottish Veterans Fund has been established to support projects that provide a wide range of advice and practical support to veterans across Scotland, and to support the creation of an armed forces union to be a voice for the wide range of interests, concerns and identities within the forces community. On that note, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), who led the way with his ten-minute rule Bill on that subject.

On a personal note, I am proud to be a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, alongside the Royal Air Force. The scheme is led by Wing Commander Greg Smith and the programme has given me a unique window on the lives of service personnel and the challenges that they face as part of their service. When I went to RAF Leeming, it really struck me to see people operating drones from inside what was almost a metal tin. When I considered the intensity of the work that they were doing in there and the fact that they still go home to a normal civilian household, it really reaffirmed some of the challenges that our serving personnel face in the light of a changing landscape. It is important to understand the hardships faced by many veterans, both in service and in the return to civilian life. We should always look to ensure that every possible support is available to them.

As others have said, Remembrance Sunday has been very different this year. With covid-19 restrictions in place, we were not able to gather together as a community to reflect and to remember all those who died in military service. However, we found ways to commemorate the fallen with private services, and landmarks across Scotland have been lit up in red to raise awareness of the poppy appeal. It is right that Members put on record their

concerns about some of the funding for such organisations—indeed, Gordon Michie, head of fundraising at Poppyscotland said recently:

“This has been one of the most challenging years in the history of Poppy Scotland, but the breadth of landmarks and businesses involved in this campaign shows that Scotland still stands shoulder to shoulder with our country's service personnel.”

During this Covid-19 public health crisis, it is important to recognise that the wars we fought decades ago did not eliminate conflict and suffering. Today, millions still suffer because of wars and atrocities, and societies are arguably more divided than ever, but we must all reflect on the lessons of the first and second world wars. In particular, Governments must remember that peace and tolerance must prevail over hatred and conflict. Everyone in this House must consider how we can use our influence to better prevent conflict from arising and better promote the compromise and dialogue that can lead to enduring peace, safety and fairness around the world.

While I laid my wreath at the Eastern Necropolis on Sunday, I thought of the thousands of other men and women who never returned home from war. The Scottish poet Neil Munro wrote:

“Sweet be their sleep now wherever they're lying,
Far though they be from the hills of their home.”

We will remember them.

2.34 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Ind): Because we are commemorating the 75th anniversary of the end of world war two, I shall concentrate entirely on that conflict. Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that you are quietly but rightly proud of your father's brave record of fighting in the second world war, but as the years and decades go by, fewer and fewer people have that sort of direct personal knowledge. In the limited time available, I would like to take one brief example from each year of the second world war, to try to humanise the picture a little bit for those who do not have the sort of personal connection that I just described.

Let us take, for example, November 1939. A converted passenger liner, HMS *Rawalpindi*, found herself trapped by two of the largest and most deadly ships in the German navy: the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau*. The captain of HMS *Rawalpindi* was Captain Edward Kennedy, who was 60 years old. He had come out of retirement after his service in the first world war and between the wars to re-enlist. Rather than surrender, he took on those two deadly ships, and the *Rawalpindi*, as was entirely predictable, went down with all flags flying and with few survivors. I am going to develop that theme, which is that many of these events are not necessarily successful, but that does not mean that they are not ultimately setting standards for inspiring their fellow service personnel, their comrades and future generations. They certainly inspired me.

We move forward from Captain Kennedy—who, incidentally, was the father of the late Sir Ludovic Kennedy—to November 1940. In 1940, another converted passenger liner, HMS *Jervis Bay*, was escorting a convoy of nearly 40 ships. The *Jervis Bay* found herself standing between that convoy and the German pocket battleship the *Admiral Scheer*. The convoy was instructed to scatter, and Captain Fogarty Fegen, who was the commander of the *Jervis Bay*, steamed towards certain death and

[Dr Julian Lewis]

destruction and saved three quarters of the ships in that convoy. There was a time when the names “Rawalpindi” and “Jervis Bay” were known throughout the land, and it is important that we periodically remind ourselves of these inspirational examples where people sacrificed themselves doing the right thing, even though they knew they had little or no chance of survival.

On a happier note, we turn to May 1941, when HMS Bulldog is a member of a flotilla of anti-submarine escorts that bring to the surface the U-110. My late friend, the then 20-year-old Sub-Lieutenant David Balme, heads up a rowing boat of half a dozen sailors. They get on board the U-110 submarine, which has been forced to the surface. They go down, not knowing whether the submarine will blow up from scuttling charges or whether there are people waiting armed at the foot of the conning tower ladder as they climb down, unable to defend themselves. They recover the Enigma machine and the code books and thus make a vital contribution to the winning of the battle of the Atlantic.

Then we come back to the Scharnhorst and the Gneisenau. It is February 1942, and half a dozen clapped-out, obsolete Swordfish biplanes take on the Scharnhorst and the Gneisenau as they sail up the English channel with enormous air cover. Of those six biplanes, all six were shot down. Five of the aircrew survived the operation and four survived the war, and one of them later became my friend: Pat Kingsmill DSO. He is typical of these people who did courageous acts that were on everyone’s lips at the time, but then went on to live quiet lives—in the case of Pat Kingsmill, as an administrator in the NHS for many years.

John Healey: I suspect that, like me, the whole House is enjoying the right hon. Gentleman’s year-by-year exposition of the second world war. I wonder whether he would accept another minute as a result of my intervention.

Dr Lewis: That is extraordinarily generous, but quite typical of the right hon. Gentleman.

We come to September 1943, and three midget submarines attack the German battleship Tirpitz in a Norwegian fjord. Godfrey Place, the captain of the X7, escapes from his sinking submarine, and later becomes admiral in charge of reserves. Although he was a very important figure in the Royal Navy, he still had time to meet somebody like me—a schoolboy in Swansea, when he was there on a visit—and to autograph a book about submarine escape. These little gestures from truly great men inspire young people.

We come to the last two. The airborne assault at Arnhem in September 1944 was another disaster. But Tony Hibbert MC, who later became a friend of mine through my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), went on to work throughout many years, trying to argue for civil defence and protection for this country.

Finally, Operation Meridian—the raids on the oil refineries at Palembang in Sumatra—happened in January 1945. Norman Richardson—again, a friend of mine, who sadly passed away—was commemorated on the 75th anniversary of the end of the war in the special edition of obituaries in *The Daily Telegraph*. He was a

telegraphist air gunner. These were people who flew on a raid in January, when people in Sumatra were not expecting it, but they did not knock out all the oil refineries so they went back a few days later, when everyone was expecting them, and they did it again. They were shot down, but three quarters of Japan’s oil refining capability was lost to the Japanese war effort.

We remember them all.

2.42 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and a particular pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis).

I represent a seat in the city of Hull, which has a strong, proud and long association with our armed forces. We were also among the hardest hit during the blitz. But today I want to speak as a commissioner of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. I am very pleased indeed that the Minister, in his opening remarks, talked about the commission, which commemorates 1.7 million Commonwealth servicemen and women from the United Kingdom and all over the Commonwealth who died during the two world wars.

As hon. Members will know, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission was founded as the Imperial War Graves Commission by royal charter on 21 May 1917, and was renamed the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in March 1960. In March this year, the Duke of Kent celebrated 50 years of unstinting service as the commission’s president. I also pay tribute to our last director general, Victoria Wallace, who left the commission in the summer.

The commission cares for the graves and memorials at 23,000 locations in more than 150 countries and territories—on every continent except Antarctica. The commission also commemorates more than 68,000 civilians who died during the second world war, by maintaining and restoring sites such as the Tower Hill memorial. Funded by six partner Governments—the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India—the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is the largest gardening organisation in the world, with a total workforce of 1,300. The vast majority—more than 850—are gardeners, who between them look after the equivalent of almost 1,000 football pitches.

Our war dead deserve the highest standards, and hon. Members will know the quality of the Portland stone graves and the monuments that the commission oversees, as well as the beautifully tended cemeteries, such as the largest commission cemetery in the world at Tyne Cot in Belgium, with almost 12,000 graves, 8,300 of which are classed as “unknown”. I encourage all hon. Members, in their own constituencies and when travelling around the country or the world, to take the opportunity to visit commission sites. Encouraging the public to visit these graves also supplements the efforts of the excellent commission staff and the trained volunteers from the commission’s Eyes On, Hands On project, helping to report on and countering the effects of weather, wear and tear and, sadly, sometimes vandalism.

One restoration project I want to mention is at Runnymede. It is the Air Forces memorial, where the commission’s new charitable arm, the Commonwealth War Graves Foundation, marked International Women’s Day by launching a new interactive way to explore the

story of the remarkable Noor Inayat Khan, a British woman spy whose code name was “Madeleine”. She was the first female wireless operator to be sent to occupied France in the second world war to aid the French resistance.

The commission maintains an extensive and accessible archive of all the Commonwealth war dead on its website, and in recent years it has opened a new award-winning visitor centre as its French HQ near Arras. However, for this 11 November—an Armistice Day like no other, as many have said—the commission is urging the public to join it in paying tribute to the 1.7 million Commonwealth war dead through a unique act of remembrance. We encourage everyone to take a moment at 7 pm tonight to step outside, look at the stars and remember the fallen. In a few key locations, such as Plymouth, Cardiff and Edinburgh, searchlights will beam light into the night sky.

I want to salute the work of many other organisations, including the Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes, in remembering our war dead and supporting veterans from many conflicts. May I take a moment to express eternal gratitude to the veterans of all our allies across the Commonwealth and beyond, who ensured that we did not stand alone for long, particularly in 1940? They sacrificed so much, as together we liberated Europe and the world from what Prime Minister Churchill described as sinking

“into the abyss of a new dark age”.—[*Official Report*, 18 June 1940; Vol. 362, c. 60.]

The United States, too, was shoulder to shoulder with us on those Normandy beaches and through the decades since—the years of the cold war and the more recent challenges of terrorism, especially since 9/11—and leading by the “power of our example”, as President-elect Biden said just this week.

Remembrance is both deeply embedded in our national consciousness and personal to all of us who had parents or grandparents in the greatest generation. We remember those who did not come back. We also remember those who did come back and helped to win the peace. I remember my dad, Eric Johnson, who joined the Navy, and my mum, Ruth, who worked in a munitions factory during world war two. In my experience, they rarely talked about what they did and what they went through as young men and women, and in enjoying peace, freedom and progress, we will always owe them everything.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): After the next speaker, the limit will be reduced to five minutes, but with six minutes, I call Colonel Bob Stewart.

2.48 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I start by quoting a poem by “Woodbine Willie”—Padre Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy:

“There are many kinds of sorrow
In this world of love and hate
But there is no keener sorrow
Than a soldier’s for his mate.”

That is very apposite for me today because I remember all the men who were killed under my command. In particular today, may I mention those killed at Ballykelly on 6 December 1982? Seventeen people were killed: six of them were civilians and 11 were soldiers. Six of the

soldiers were from my own company, A Company of the Cheshires—Steven Bagshaw, Clinton Collins, Philip McDonough, David Stitt, Steven Smith and Shaw Williamson. They all died when I was present.

I was the incident commander. As I went into the wrecked building that was the Droppin Well, almost the first person I saw was a girl lying on the ground. I was horrified. Both her legs had gone, and an arm. I knelt down—horrified, again—and spoke to her: “Are you all right, darling?” She said, “I think so.” I said, “Are you hurting?” She said, “No.” I said to her, “How are you feeling?” She said, “I don’t know. What’s happened?” I said, “There’s been a bomb.” “Oh”, she said, “am I hurt?” I said, “You’re hurt.” She said, “Am I hurt very badly?” I said, “You’re hurt very badly.” She said, “Am I going to die?” Forgive me—I said, “Yes.” I could see no other way; there was blood everywhere. She said, “Am I going to die now?”, and I said, “I think you are.” She said, “Will you hold me?” I held her and she died within two minutes. I wept. She died in a state of grace. She was one of 17 killed that day.

It took me four hours to identify my six soldiers in the morgue of Altnagelvin Hospital. I went to their funerals in Cheshire—six funerals in five days, two on the Friday. At the second funeral, as I came out of St George’s church in Stockport, there was an old lady crying on the far side of the road. I crossed over. I was in uniform. I put my arm round her and I said to her, “Don’t worry—he’s out of his pain.” She said, “You don’t understand, young man.” I said, “I do understand”, because I felt inside my brain that I did understand—I was there when he died. But she read my brain—what I was thinking. She said, “No, you don’t understand. You see, I stood here when I was a little girl and watched 6th Cheshires”—I think it was 6th Cheshires; they were Cheshires—“march into that church, 900 of them. After the battle of the Somme they filled three pews. I am crying for them.” Then I understood.

One thousand, four hundred and forty-one soldiers, sailors and airmen—service personnel—died in Northern Ireland. That is more than in all the other conflicts together since, by 50%. You have to remember that.

I remember, too, my escort driver, Wayne Edwards, killed on 13 January 1993. I had given the order to escort four women to hospital through Gornji Vakuf, and he was shot through the head as he did so. I am responsible for his death.

When I came here in 2010, I went into the Tea Room and a guy comes up to me and he says, “Nice to see you, Colonel—we haven’t met since Turbe.” I said, “Why?” He said, “I was in the Bosnian Croat army. I was a sniper.” I said, “The snipers shot Staff Sergeant Steve Bristow in the head. You were a sniper.” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Well, that’s a turn-up for the books—you’re working in the House of Commons and I arrive here and you’re actually a sniper that’s shot one of my soldiers.” He said, “Yes.” But here is the point: he was a young man doing his duty, as he saw it. He was not a criminal; he was just doing what he thought was right.

When I think of Remembrance Day, I am not just thinking of the soldiers, sailors and airmen; I am thinking of the civilians. In my own constituency, 320 civilians were killed in the second world war—more than the servicemen from my own constituency. So I am thinking of them. I am particularly thinking of other civilians

[Bob Stewart]

too. I am thinking of that girl—one of five killed on 6 December. It saddens me that they are not here, and that is what Remembrance Day is all about.

2.54 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): May I say what an honour it is to follow the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart)? I thank him for the way in which he served and protected the people of Northern Ireland.

At this time of national reflection, we remember all those who stood, who bravely volunteered, who served with valour, who fought bravely and heroically, and who died as heroes. They did that for all for us: for this land we call home and for the freedoms this nation has and I trust will always hold dear.

On the 11th day of the 11th month, we think particularly of the horrors of the first world war. My mind turns to the battlefields of France. As a daughter of Ulster, I pause to consider the sacrifice of those who left the factories and farmlands of my homeland, of Ulster soil, and who laid down their lives on the battlefields of the Somme. On 1 July morn, as the 36th (Ulster) Division went over the top, little did they know that 5,500 would be killed, wounded or missing within two days. Two thousand five hundred would lose their lives. In the words of Sir Wilfrid Spender:

“I am not an Ulsterman, but yesterday, the 1 July, as I followed their amazing attack I felt that I would rather be an Ulsterman than anything else in the world.”

Today, row after row of white headstones mark the sacrifice of these fathers, sons, husbands, brothers and friends. Many more headstones also stand in the Somme region and beyond Flanders fields. It is a solemn privilege to visit these bloodstained lands and to visit the iconic Ulster tower, which I might add is celebrating its 100th anniversary next year.

In today's Northern Ireland, that sacrifice is still remembered. I have the privilege of working with a group called the Ancre Somme Association; a group of more dedicated people you will not find. Their aim locally is to ensure that our children and future generations are taught about the importance of remembrance. I think we can all take a lesson from that today.

I also want to commend the incredible work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. We heard about much of it from the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), and we thank her for that. Its work in the building and upkeep of 23,000 cemeteries across the world ensures that 1.7 million men and women of the Commonwealth forces who died in the first and second world wars will not be forgotten. It is, quite simply, remarkable. When we visit the cemeteries, they are immaculate. That is a testament to the Commission, its staff and its amazing army of gardeners. They do amazing work.

At this time of remembrance, we do, of course, remember those who have laid down their lives in all conflicts. While my focus has been on the great war, the sacrifice of those in world war two, the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Falklands and other conflicts is no less. Of course, as a representative of Northern Ireland, I also want to pay tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice in Operation Banner.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Touching on Operation Banner, and recognising that it was the longest continuous deployment for the British Army, it is important to recognise that this debate arose from a petition. Of the top 10 constituencies across the country who supported this debate today, five were from Northern Ireland, including my own constituency, demonstrating the strength of feeling, regard, appreciation and admiration that people from Northern Ireland have for the service given to us.

Carla Lockhart: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and for a point well made.

According to the Ministry of Defence, 1,441 serving members of the British armed forces died in Operation Banner, 722 of whom were killed in paramilitary attacks. One hundred and ninety-seven Ulster Defence Regiment officers and soldiers were killed between 1 April 1970 and 30 June 1992. A further 61 ex-soldiers were murdered after they had resigned from the regiment. Three hundred and two Royal Ulster Constabulary men and women were murdered during the troubles, all because they wore the badge of the RUC. Twenty-nine prison officers lost their lives. As recently as November 2012, prison officer David Black, in my own constituency, was murdered by the enemies of Ulster. We think of his family today as they continue to mourn his passing.

While many of those who were left behind to mourn the loss of loved ones in world wars are now gone too, the tears still flow in many homes of those taken too soon during service in Northern Ireland. My thoughts are with them today, and our gratitude is forever with those who stood as a human shield against the terrorists who, by bomb and bullet, sought to destroy my country and my community. I reiterate my call to the Government today to protect those Northern Ireland veterans from vexatious prosecutions.

3 pm

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): Having served for many years in Her Majesty's armed forces, I consider it an honour to have been selected to participate in this significant debate and to hear that powerful recollection from my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). This year more than ever, as we reflect on those who sacrificed their lives in service to our nation, we come to recognise a familiarity whereby the very best in our community has come to the fore, demonstrating that service to others underpins our society.

Service in the constituency of Broxtowe is no new thing. We are proud to offer a home to Chetwynd barracks, a site that has played its part over the last century. In world war one, it was the site of the national shell-filling factory, operated by civilians, providing munitions in support of the western front. In July 1918, the site was levelled by a devastating explosion in which 139 people lost their lives and 250 were injured. It was the biggest loss of life in a single explosion in world war one.

I also want to take this opportunity to welcome Colonel Gavin Hatcher OBE to his position as Commander 170 Engineer Group and the Station Commander at Chetwynd. The barracks is home to the Royal Engineers of 170 Engineer Group, the Mission Training and Mobilisation Centre, Nottingham Troop, 721 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Squadron Royal Logistic Corps, Army and maritime reserves, 350 Squadron of 33 Engineer Regiment and HMS Sherwood.

170 Engineer Group provides technical infrastructure specialist support to defence both at home and abroad, including most recently on Op Rescript, with support for the construction of the Nightingale hospitals and the wider testing capacity. I wish those currently deployed success in their endeavours and a safe return home to their families and Chetwynd. The Mission Training and Mobilisation Centre has been responsible in the last 10 years for training those individual augmentees who have gone to Iraq or Afghanistan in a regular reserve and civilian capacity, some of whom have not returned. In this time of crisis, we have perhaps been granted a new perspective on the 75th anniversary of the second world war. To my eye, we have been awarded the opportunity to see precisely that the liberties for which they fought are more valuable than we may ordinarily appreciate, and that the debt we owe them is even greater than we may have previously assumed.

These uncertain times are incredibly testing for us all, and we have had to adapt quickly to ensure that we are able to continue our lives with some normality while keeping as safe as possible. It is services such as the armed forces that have been integral to allowing that to happen. So in this time of need we must show the armed forces community that we have their back, just as they have ours. I can sum it up no better than by saying, "We will remember them."

3.4 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): It is a privilege to have time in this debate and to follow so many powerful speeches. It is a very important time to pay tribute to the men and women who served our country past and present and to their enormous sacrifices made in defence of the freedoms we all enjoy today. It is always humbling to attend Remembrance events; I did so this weekend in Newport and across my constituency. I thank all those involved in ensuring that events could go ahead this year safely in the unique and challenging circumstances of the pandemic. While services were different on this occasion, they were no less poignant, especially with this year marking the 80th anniversary of the evacuation of Dunkirk and the battle of Britain and the 75th anniversary of the end of the second world war. So I pay tribute to all those who have served and made the ultimate sacrifice for our country. We remember them today. I also thank the charities, the Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes and, in Newport, Newport Veterans, for all that they do locally to support veterans.

I also pay tribute to and record our appreciation for another group that played a hugely important role in both world wars and subsequent conflicts: the merchant navy. The history of the city of Newport as a key south Wales port is intricately linked with seafaring, and the close ties with the merchant navy are part of that. Nationally, the Merchant Navy Association, led with enthusiasm and passion by its chair, John Sail, who is stepping back this year after years of service, and its president, Vivien Foster, has done tremendous work to raise awareness of the dedication of seafarers over the past century, and supports those who are still with us. Its annual commemoration, Merchant Navy Day on 3 September, is proudly observed in Newport every year. We have an active branch of the association in Newport, stemming directly from the dedication of stalwarts such as Alan Speight and the late Bert Bale, who headed the local branch with passion from its

inception until his death in 2012. The Newport association's work is helping to bring local veterans together and commemorate the sacrifices made by merchant seafarers in two world wars. On Saturday, we will meet at the merchant navy memorial to remember them.

The sacrifices were significant. At the outbreak of the first world war, 43% of the world's merchant ships—some 20 million tonnes gross—were owned and operated by Britain. Those ships brought food and raw materials, and exported industries' output to the world, including coal and steel from south Wales. Germany regarded the cutting-off of Britain's trade routes as a vital means to victory, with the submarine becoming its principal weapon. The policy of unrestricted warfare meant that merchant navy ships were at constant risk of attack. The threat was not fully countered until the introduction of the convoy system in May 1917. None the less, German U-boats sank 6,924 allied ships—almost 13 million tonnes gross, with the loss of more than 14,600 merchant seafarers by the end of the war in 1918.

As we know, the role of the merchant navy was no less hazardous in the second world war, with convoys in the Atlantic, Mediterranean and elsewhere. Four thousand seven hundred British flagships were sunk, and more than 29,000 merchant seamen died, with a higher proportion of fatalities than all other services. Of those who perished, 442 were from Gwent and among them was 14-year-old Raymond Steed from Newport, who was killed on board the SS Empire Morn when the ship was hit by a U-boat mine off the coast of Morocco. He was the youngest services recruit from Wales to die in the second world war, and the second youngest in Britain. There is no doubt that the efforts of the merchant navy in the second world war helped to keep the country going and enabled other services to operate. We should remember their bravery and importance. The hazards and risks that today's merchant seamen and women face have changed, but they still exist.

It is important to emphasise that during times of past conflict, merchant sailors lived particularly harsh lives. They faced the terror of submarines every day, many lost close friends to torpedo attacks, and many were killed or wounded. The psychological trauma faced by merchant navy veterans cannot be understated. We have never had a full picture of the undiagnosed incidence of PTSD among merchant navy seafarers, and I hope that we can do more to look at this. I want to finish by saying how proud I am to represent a city with a rich seafaring tradition, and highlight the gratitude that we owe to them, alongside all those in our armed forces. It is a service that will remain a central part of our act of remembrance and debate.

3.9 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Today, we remember all those who died in war. As we peer into the gaslit world of the great war or seek to look behind the blackout curtains of 1940s Britain, we realise that we follow two generations of giants. Many families have fathers and mothers, uncles and aunts, grandfathers and great-grandfathers who died in battle that we might live in peace. They died in great fear of tyranny and their immediate circumstances that we might be free. They died for our country, so we can be proud of what they did. Some may seek to use powerful new searchlights of history to change the picture they want to see

[John Redwood]

or to play this down, but nothing can change who they were, what they did, or the principles they carried to victory.

Today is a day for patriotism: that quiet, confident patriotism that characterises our country at its best; the patriotism that comes from being at peace with what those generations did and with the causes they fought. Our country does not go in for brash, aggressive nationalism, asserting ourselves by doing down others.

The unknown soldier was rightly honoured by king and country all those years ago in recognition that the world war was an immense strain on all, at home or at the front. It required the most enormous super-human efforts of everyone. The whole country was at war, not just the armed forces and the politicians. The best way we can be true to their memory is to enjoy the freedoms they left us. We can best pursue the path of peace with vivid memories of how, after war ends, the talking begins to reconcile the differences. We must learn from the failure of the great war to end the European conflict. We can best uphold the sacred candle of free speech, turning conflicts into exchanges of passionate words, not bombs and bullets. We can best uphold the right of everyone to a vote and a voice in a democratic society and uphold the right of small as well as large states to self-determination.

So let us vow today that, in this precious debating Chamber we enjoy, we will work to ensure that we seek to talk and vote our way through our differences. Let us pray that our country is not called again to perform the heroic and brave tasks we remember today. Now that states have so much greater power to kill and harm people than they did even a century ago, let us trust in democracy and freedom.

We have had to fight far too many wars. Today, we need a strong defence to keep us safe and to increase the chances of peace. The great war did not turn out to be the war to end all wars, though that was the promise. That was the hope of many in our nation, so let us today vow to find a way to bring us nearer to that most crucial of ambitions.

3.13 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On this particularly solemn day, it is also important that we have in our thoughts and prayers the people affected by the terrible and cowardly bomb attack at a Remembrance Day service in Saudi Arabia this morning, including British diplomats there. It is a terrible and despicable act at a time of remembrance.

I attended the quieter than usual, but no less significant, remembrance service in Penarth at the weekend, when I thought not only of my constituents and my constituency's connections to all branches of our armed forces—and indeed the merchant navy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) spoke about—but about my own family, as many of us do at the time of remembrance.

I thought of my grandfather James, who served in the 1st Airborne Division. He was shot and wounded at Arnhem and taken prisoner of war. I thought of my great grandfather Peter, who was in the Somme with the King's Own Scottish Borderers, and Ernest, who was in the Royal Field Artillery. I thought of my grandfather Harold, who served with the US army at the Bulge. It is

particularly important that this week we recognise the connections between our countries at that time of war, how we fought tyranny in Europe and would do so again. I also thought of my father, who during the cold war served for 16 years with the Royal Signals in Germany, with so many others. They are a generation who perhaps we have not recognised in the way we should for their service and ultimately their willingness to put themselves on the line in what could have been a nuclear apocalypse. That is certainly what many who were serving on the frontlines in Germany during the cold war expected.

Over the past few years, I have visited the Somme, Normandy and many other locations, including some with my hon. Friend on the other side, the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). It was so powerful to hear his words. He and I have spoken many times about his experiences. I have travelled to Bosnia and to battlefields with him, and they have been some of the most moving and affecting times that I have spent while a Member of this House.

I remember the work of those fantastic veterans' charities in my constituency. I think of the work of the Royal British Legion. I have spent time with organisations such as Woody's Lodge, which was set up in honour of Paul Woodland, a former member of the Royal Marines and the Special Boat Service who sadly lost his life on a training exercise in 2012 before he was due to be redeployed to Afghanistan. Woody's was originally located in my constituency, but is now located in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns). It does remarkable work in our communities, as does the Welsh Veterans Partnership. David Price, a former Welsh Guard who served in the Falklands, leads the work there with other veterans to ensure pathways to housing and support in our communities. He rightly advocates powerfully on behalf of veterans, for example on issues related to the transition from military to civilian life—he would argue that the MOD needs to look more at working with smaller veterans' charities in that—but also the rules around housing benefit, universal credit and how our benefits and support systems often do not work for veterans. He also works on the need for more specialist attention for those who have been medically discharged and need support from the Department for Work and Pensions and others.

I think about the contribution of the armed forces overall to Wales. A number of us spoke in a debate specifically on that in February this year. I think of our Army connections through the Royal Welsh, the Queen's Dragoon Guards, the Welsh Cavalry and the Welsh Guards and their locations locally. I think of the proud traditions they all have. It has been a privilege for me to spend time with them at commemorative and training occasions over the past few years.

I think of our Navy connections and our Royal Marines connections. HMS Cambria, our fantastic new facility located in Cardiff Bay, was previously in the constituency of the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan. I think of our strong connections with the Royal Air Force, particularly St Athan, just down the road, and Guy Gibson, formerly of the Dambusters, 617 Squadron, who spent time in Penarth in my constituency.

I think also of our merchant navy traditions, and people like Harold Boudier, who served on their Arctic convoys. He is now 94, and he proudly told me how he remembers VE Day in Scapa Flow. He still has the pint glass

that he drank from in celebration on that day. He takes it to the pub every Remembrance Sunday to remember those whom he served with in incredibly difficult circumstances.

Most importantly I remember today our active armed forces personnel serving around the world, particularly those serving in the locations we often do not hear about, such as in Africa, including our service personnel in Mali, those who played a role in peacekeeping in South Sudan, those on training missions, those in Somalia and elsewhere, and those who responded to the Ebola outbreak so bravely and incredibly in Sierra Leone.

I think of those who, as has been spoken about, serve on the domestic front in our covid response. I had the honour of seeing our forces training as part of Operation Temperer a number of years ago for scenarios just like this. As was said earlier by the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood)—he is no longer in his place—they are some of the best planners, the best experts and some of the most dedicated people. They are exactly who we should have leading this response, particularly now as we roll out a vaccine. I pay tribute to all that they do.

We will remember. We will remember all those aspects of our armed forces, past and present.

3.18 pm

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): It is a privilege to pay tribute to all those who served and are serving in the armed forces, whether in conflicts or peacekeeping duties around the world. It is appropriate that I follow my neighbour, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), as we have many common interests because of the interconnectivity of our constituencies. All the individuals we have referred to are heroes to us all and deserve our respect and greatest support. I had the privilege of visiting the Welsh Guards in Afghanistan two years ago. It was humbling to see them in action and to see the risks they were exposed to on a daily basis and the conditions in which they lived to act in our interests.

Before I come to the main theme about the footprint of the armed forces across our Union, I want to recognise the charities that support service personnel and veterans in my constituency, whether the cadets and the leaders of those cadets associations who provide leadership and training to young people, or the mentoring charity Woody's Lodge, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned. It was started following the tragic death of Special Boat Serviceman Paul Woodland by his widow, Sian, and a team of supporters led by David Trotman.

Last Sunday, there were services throughout the many villages, towns and cities across the country, and my constituency was no different. More services will have taken place today. I pay tribute to those who organise events, raise money, fly standards and support veterans in so many ways throughout the year. They are all heroes—from the Royal British Legion, with Teresa Goodwin and Jimmy Green, who helped organise the service in Barry last Saturday, to Terry and Margaret McKeown and Howard Provis, who travel the country throughout the year to fly the Barry RAFA standard, and the late, great Bryan Foley, who was the cornerstone of such activities in the past, linking the Royal British Legion right through to scouting organisations. We salute them all for their service and for the work they always do and always have done.

My main theme relates to the footprint of the armed forces, their significance in defending, representing and sustaining the Union of the UK, and the link that they provide to our communities. When we think of symbols that reflect our Union, the armed forces are central. Through history, they have defended our liberty and maintained our freedom across all four nations, making the greatest of sacrifices in our interests. They play their full part in the fight against terrorism, wherever that may be, from cathedral cities such as Salisbury through to attacks and threats in all four nations of the UK, to combating the international terror threat, just as I saw in Afghanistan.

It is also relevant that, in the same way as they represent all four nations, the armed forces are made up from all communities and their footprint reflects that. I am hugely proud that Wales, with 5% of the UK's population, makes up 7% of the Army. Similarly, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland contribute with their garrisons, nuclear bases, RAF runways, training grounds and specialist centres. Communities play their part, too, often welcoming the disruption that it sometimes brings for them. Farmers in Wales make their land available for training, the Brecon Beacons are well known, and the mountains of Snowdonia are used for flying exercises.

I say gently to the Minister that those factors need to be remembered when reviewing basing is under consideration. Operational need must always come first, but decisions about basing cannot be made outside the context of the armed forces' Union make-up and the communities that they support and recruit from. I am not asking for a quota; I simply ask that recognition of the armed forces' geographical make-up is part of any base review. That would help them to maintain a UK relevance with communities and would play a part in recruitment and retention, with people considering their sacrifices to be closer to the family.

St Athan in my constituency was designated the primary Army site in Wales. The re-establishment of that Army site has not been as logical as I would have liked. There is a need for the Welsh Government and the MOD to come together to resolve the situation, reflecting the history but also looking forward to the challenges that we will have in the future.

3.23 pm

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Our annual remembrance services and traditions, from the laying of wreaths to the wearing of poppies, must be permanent in the life of our nation, even as those who lived through those wretched times leave us, for we must continue to remember—remember what prices were paid and remember what sacrifices we still demand of the men and women of our armed forces.

Like other Members, I see these moments through the stories of those from my constituency who died, including the 623 men of Kingston borough who died in the great war, the 6,000 officers and men of our former local regiment, the East Surrey Regiment, who were killed, and Squadron Leader Ian Bazalgette, a Canadian-British pilot who grew up in New Malden in my constituency. His Lancaster bomber was severely damaged by anti-aircraft flak prior to arrival at his target on 4 August 1944, but he nevertheless continued to the target and completed his task before ordering his crew to bale out. When he found that two of his crew were too injured to bale out, he attempted to land the

[Ed Davey]

burning plane to save the crew members rather than baling out himself. He died in the attempt and was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously. So when I deliver my election leaflets in Bazalgette Gardens, New Malden, named after that brave pilot, I think of him and thank him for his sacrifice for democracy. I thank them all for their sacrifices for our freedoms.

There have been many wars in our country's history, across many centuries, but the first and second world wars stand out for the dreadful death tolls and for what was at stake. They also stand out for another reason. Those wars touched the lives of every non-combatant: not only the families who were bereaved but the whole country, whose lives were on hold for the duration of the conflict. Whether or not they were directly involved in the war effort, they had to live with the restrictions, the rationing, the lights out and the wide-scale suspension of liberty as people collectively fought to preserve their freedoms.

It would be crass and wrong to draw direct parallels between the deprivations we are now suffering during this pandemic and the sacrifices and hardships that those millions suffered for years during those bloody wars, but we can learn lessons and perhaps draw some comfort, even inspiration, from them, not least because this pandemic is also affecting everyone. It has forced millions of people across our country and across our world to take a stand and do their bit, and while this pandemic is different in so many ways, we need that collective courage and discipline to beat the virus.

Today, we rely especially on people serving on the modern frontline: those working in our hospitals and the careworkers in our care homes. They are today's civilian heroes. We also rely on some very clever people, such as our amazing scientists, to find a solution. They are part of the amazing international effort to find a vaccine to shorten the life of the pandemic, like some modern-day Alan Turing and the amazing people who served at Bletchley Park and who shortened the second world war. Today's enemy may be invisible, but it is deadly and it is impacting the everyday lives of millions.

Over the years when I have paid my respects at war memorials, my own personal thoughts have been influenced by my nana's wartime stories. It was my grandad who went to fight in the Army, driving lorries in north Africa and Italy, but my nana, left at home to look after my mother, was also profoundly impacted by the war. It is her stories of looking after evacuees from London's east end that have, for some reason, always stuck with me. She told stories of how she had to give up her own rations to feed and care for not only her own children—my mother—but the children of strangers, of how she took up smoking to calm her nerves and of her 10-mile cycle ride to the factory making radios for the submarines her younger brother, my Uncle Sam, was serving on. When my grandmother died, aged 90, I was so proud that in the congregation of 12 were two of her evacuees, who had come to say thank you. We are inspired by all their service.

3.28 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and especially to follow the brilliant, eloquent speeches that we have heard so far this afternoon. Over the years, I

have been privileged to observe Armistice Day and the two-minute silence in some unique and special places. Twelve years ago, as part of the team that organised the 90th anniversary of the great war, I was at the Cenotaph with Harry Patch, Henry Allingham and Bill Stone, the three remaining veterans of that awful conflict. I defy anyone who was there that day or remembers watching it on TV not to have been moved by the sight of Henry Allingham, who was determined to lay his own wreath at the foot of the Cenotaph to pay tribute to his fallen comrades but was sadly unable to do so.

In 2015, I was with colleagues who worked with me at the European Parliament in Loos in northern France on a cold, grey northern French morning as the gloom lifted upon row upon row of British gravestones in the cemetery, many of which were marked "Known unto God". We witnessed the residents of that town paying tribute to the British soldiers, 7,766 of whom gave their lives at that battle. Many of them were from the north-east of Scotland and Tayside. They fell in defence of that town for their country and for the freedom of France and its allies.

Of course, I think of my great-uncle Samuel Coyle who, at 19 years old, a young lad who had never left Greenock in his life, fell at Gallipoli and lies buried alongside 600 other British and Commonwealth soldiers at the Pink Farm cemetery in Turkey. We often focus very much on the sacrifices made by the generation of world war one and world war two, but this weekend I was struck that we should, of course, also be thinking of the guys and girls who served in our armed forces much more recently. It struck me that, barely six years after British troops withdrew from Helmand province in Afghanistan and the end of that operation, the sacrifices made by the men, women and service families much more recently are, if not being forgotten, already fading from public consciousness.

I will not forget, nearly every morning in those awful days of 2007-08, being at Dartmouth or Portsmouth, on deployment overseas or, indeed, here in London, opening a newspaper or turning on the news to read yet another name or hear about another cortège passing through Royal Wootton Bassett. I remember while based at RAF Uxbridge remarking to an oppo of mine as we watched the festival of Remembrance how sad it was that the war widows' procession, which when I was much younger had been predominantly made up of widows from the world war two generation, was much more the families of young men and women of my age.

Although life in the rest of the country went on pretty much as normal, as we fretted about the financial crisis, the coalition Government or preparations for the Olympics, our young boys and girls were under fire and were prepared to give their lives for our country and for us in a foreign field. We should never forget them or those men and women who should still be here with us today, who might otherwise be standing in the House or walking among us in the streets.

This debate is entitled "Remembrance, UK Armed Forces and Society," and one of my earliest and clearest memories is as a seven-year-old going out with all my primary school to watch the Gordon Highlanders parade through Inverurie, a town Madam Deputy Speaker knows well, to mark their disbandment and amalgamation with the Seaforth and Cameron Highlanders to form 1st Battalion. The Highlanders, which subsequently

became the Highlanders, 4th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland—4 Scots. In this identity, they have seen tours of duty in both Iraq and Afghanistan. I remember so many people being sad about that 200-year-old local link ending—the link to the north-east of Scotland, the unique, beautiful and fiercely independent part of Scotland that the regiment was proud to come from. The finest regiment in the world, as Winston Churchill called it, had come to an end.

The north-east is not unique in feeling that. Every area feels an attachment to its local regiment, and every area feels a deep sense of loss when the British Army, as it has throughout its history, goes through a reorganisation and modernisation process and merges, disbands, renames or moves regiments. However, there is a danger in removing that local link and taking the Army, or the Navy or Air Force for that matter, out of a local community, shrinking the size and therefore the visibility of the defence footprint across the country for whatever economic, strategic or political reason, that we run the risk of removing our armed forces, the men and women, from public consciousness and of their becoming out of sight and out of mind.

I represent one of the biggest constituencies in the country. It covers Aberdeenshire, the fourth largest county in Scotland. Between Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, we have a population of 490,000 people and cover an area of 6,498 square miles. We have not one regular Army, Navy or Air Force presence. It is incumbent on all of us, as we mark Remembrance Day today and go about our lives from now on, to remember the men and women of the armed forces serving today. Although they are not physically present in all the communities where they used to be, we should make sure they are ever present in our thoughts as we move forward through the rest of the year.

3.33 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I begin by declaring an interest as a trustee of the Commonwealth War Graves Foundation and a former Commonwealth war graves commissioner. I also join other hon. and right hon. Members in their recognition of the sacrifice made by those who died in the service of their country, and I pay tribute to the members of our armed forces who serve us today.

I particularly thank the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for his contribution to the debate. Although he sits on the Government Benches, I consider him a good friend. He did the House a service with his recollection, which must have been very difficult for him, so I thank him for that.

The annual act of remembrance is a relatively modern concept. It is only 100 years today that the first Armistice Day, with the interment of the Unknown Warrior and the two-minute silence, began. Next year will see 100 years of the poppy appeal. Prior to that, the involvement of this country in war was mainly recognised by the battles that we fought, and their names litter towns and villages across our nation. It was the first world war that galvanised the country in its remembrance, partly because it was the first war fought as a conscription nation. The public came together to start that act of annual remembrance, which I hope will go on for many centuries to come.

History is often written in terms of great events and the great men of history, but I think it should be about the individual, because—as the hon. Member for

Beckenham eloquently said—these events are about individuals. It is important to remember those individuals, whether it is Will Lawson—the brother of one of my predecessors, Jack Lawson—who died at Ypres in 1915; or Sergeant Steven Campbell from Pelton in my constituency, who was killed in Afghanistan in March 2010; or Nathan Cuthbertson, a 19-year-old who died in 2008 and whose parents I had the privilege of meeting when I was a Defence Minister. It is important to remember each and every one of them.

Remembrance is not about the glorification of war; it is about recognising the sacrifice and remembering, as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) said, the reasons we need peace. There is a challenge for us all—as the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) mentioned—because, as our armed forces have contracted and the second world war generation slowly pass away, our connections with the armed forces become more remote. That is why it is more important that we keep that link, and I pay tribute to the Royal British Legion and the service charities that make sure we not only remember but support those who have been affected by war.

Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), I thank the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. I was a commissioner for eight years and it was a great privilege to work with those men and women who work tirelessly throughout the world to ensure that people who gave their lives in the service of this country are remembered. The foundation of which I have the privilege of being a trustee is trying to ensure that those memories continue for future generations. As I say, it is not about glorification but about making sure that we remember. As time goes by, we need to ensure that remembrance continues, not just from the first and second world wars but, as has been openly said in this debate, of all those who have lost their lives through conflict.

Stephen Doughty: I agree that it is very important to remember more recent conflicts, for example the Falklands. Will my right hon. Friend join me in recognising a very positive moment today? It is nearly 40 years since the Falklands conflict, and while we remember those who lost their lives in that conflict, we recognise the work of those who have been de-mining. Today, the Falkland Islands celebrates the fact that mines have been completely removed. The conflict lives on not only in those who suffered and died, but in its physical impact, and it is great that that has now been removed from the Falkland Islands.

Mr Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend. I have had the privilege of visiting the Falkland Islands on several occasions. We could ask anyone who goes to, for example, San Carlos and sits in the cemetery there. There is no more spiritual place in the world that I have been in terms of the honour and dedication given to those individuals for whom it is their last resting place.

Today is about reflection and keeping the memory of those individuals' lives; it is about making sure we do not forget them. It is also important to remember what our servicemen and women are doing today on our behalf to preserve the way of life which we wake up every morning and take for granted, but which we know is incredibly fragile in the very uncertain world of today.

3.39 pm

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who speaks tirelessly in support of our military. I am compelled to mention the moving speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). As he knows, I have an enduring connection with the 22nd Cheshire Regiment, and I particularly recall its peacekeeping role in the Balkans.

Remembrance Sunday in Wrexham was very different this year from any other, but we continued with a covid-safe service. I salute and commend the Royal British Legion, Wrexham County Borough Council and Wrexham.com for their can-do attitude in ensuring that this poignant event, held at the Royal Welch Fusiliers memorial, went ahead and was made accessible to as many people as possible through a live link. This Wrexham veteran says thank you to them and to all the service charities that support Wrexham, including the veterans breakfast club, the Royal Artillery Association, Homes for Veterans Cymru and the Gresford British Legion, which provides a meeting place where veterans can have a pint, a chat and a game of dominoes and gain valuable peer support.

I was a soldier back in the '80s and '90s when women joined a specific corps within the three services. I was in the Women's Royal Army Corps and I am pleased to say that the military has moved on a pace. Today, around 13% of our reserve and regular armed forces are women—that is nearly 21,500 women in military uniform. Back in 1990, only 40% of jobs open to men were also open to women, but now women can undertake any role in the armed forces, including those of fast jet pilots, submariners and special forces and frontline combat roles. Nothing is barred and we now have parity of the sexes. A great milestone has been reached. It is a success that we see parity and equality of opportunity for women in the military, and our veterans have been helped by the introduction of a covenant, the railcard and the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill to stop vexatious claims.

Despite the positive advancements for women in the military and for female veterans, there are still issues to address, ranging from obstacles to career progression to a lack of economic activity when back in civvy street. This is causing problems not only for the operational effectiveness of our military, but for female recruitment and retention.

It is an honour to sit on the Defence Committee with colleagues from across the House and we realise the great improvements that have been made for and by women in the armed forces. However, the fact remains that women continue to be over-represented in the service complaints system. While there are now great opportunities, the journey to success is often paved with discrimination, harassment and bullying. While the door to equality has been opened across the House, we must make sure that those doors are not shut by the ingrained laddish culture of the military. The words “laddish culture” are not mine; they were the words used by the Chief of the Defence Staff to acknowledge that there is a problem.

As a response, the Defence Committee has proposed to run a Sub-Committee, which I hope to chair, looking at the experiences of women in the military—those serving and veterans. This will provide a platform for women to talk about their experiences, including the

positives, so that we can champion what a great career the military is, and the negatives, so we can rectify them and ensure that future generations of women in uniform have total equality in practice, as well as in theory.

The problems faced by serving women and veterans have not happened on one Government's watch. They have evolved over decades, from Aden to Afghanistan, and it is the duty of all of us to acknowledge and support a cultural change as we go forward. Britain has a global reputation to uphold—a reputation for equality, fairness, honouring our troops and looking after our veterans. We can and should do something about the problems faced by women in the military and the culture that they are subjected to. I, and, I know, many of my colleagues, will do all we can to ensure that the voices of military women and veterans are heard.

3.43 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton), who clearly has so much knowledge about life in the services. Today is an important day to pay tribute to our armed forces for their service and ultimately their sacrifice, for the conflicts they have fought and for the work they have done throughout the world to preserve peace and to combat Ebola in Sierra Leone and other countries, and for the important civil work that they have done, not least on our islands with covid-19.

Sunday was not a normal Remembrance Sunday. It was important that we paid our respects, as always, to show our gratitude. Normally, it would be an opportunity to meet veterans such as Len, Stuart or Paul, as I would have done last year to talk about some of their experiences, or even Rusty, who is now getting very old but is one of our great, gallant airmen of yesteryear. In Warwick, we would normally see hundreds of people around the war memorial, honouring the 358 men and one woman from Warwick who died in the great war, and the subsequent 112 who lost their lives in world war two. We would see the march past the war memorial and hear the sound of the local bagpiper, Andy Wheeler, and the last post played by a bugler from Warwick School.

In Leamington, there are 550 names on the war memorial from the first war, and many hundreds following from the second war and subsequent conflicts—all courageous, all gallant. Among those names, there are recipients of the Victoria Cross: Lance-Corporal William Amey, Captain Arthur Kilby, Lieutenant John Cridlan Barrett, and perhaps most significantly Private Henry Tandey, the most decorated British private soldier of the first war, who in the space of six weeks in the autumn of 1918 was awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal, a Military Cross and the Victoria Cross. However, I want to recognise his near neighbours, just down Kenilworth Street from where he grew up: the Tims brothers, Fred, William and Jack, all lost in the same conflict. I want to remember in particular their mother Esther and so many families who lost so many.

The strength of feeling was best illustrated by Warwick Poppies in 2018—62,500 hand-knitted poppies decorated our church at St Mary's in Warwick. The scale of loss is perhaps best illustrated by a map produced by the Leamington history group that showed every household across the town that had suffered a loss in the great war. It was virtually every house in those terraces in the centre of Leamington, and some of those houses had

multiple stickers. That map showed how communities were literally decimated: so many towns, villages and cities, if they had maps, would show the same.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) was right to say that we should think about the individual. All of us will have lost family in those wars and in subsequent conflicts, perhaps relations in this country or from other Commonwealth nations. This is perhaps illustrated, if I may, by my own great-uncle Clarke Duff, who in 1915 left the farm in Ontario, Canada to fight in Flanders fields, but would sadly never till a field again.

We have much to be thankful for, and so many to thank, including those who served and made the ultimate sacrifice in subsequent conflicts. I thank the Royal British Legion for its work, and particularly Tony Glover and Pat Edgington for the extraordinary work they do in raising so much money locally. I also thank other charities for their work: Help for Heroes, and people like Michael Vallance and Charlie Sabin, and the Royal Air Forces Association, and people like Patrick Fitzgerald and Dave Brown.

Finally, can we remember and think of all those who were left behind and lost so much of their lives? I am thinking of the families and loved ones: people such as Esther Tims, who I mentioned, and for whom life can barely have been worth living, and those friends of my parents—all women, who we referred to as aunts—whose boyfriends never returned and who would never marry, but would live with the loss all their life. These are the people I wish to remember and pay tribute to.

3.48 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): When the guns stopped in 1918, at the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month, the curtain effectively fell on the most devastating world war we have ever seen. I have never understood why we call it the “great war”, because there is nothing great about warfare whatsoever, but it may just be that the greatness refers to those who fought in such appalling conditions and gave so much. Exactly 100 years ago today, the unknown warrior was interred at Westminster Abbey, and the poppy is still worn with pride by so many people today as a memory of the appalling circumstances of Flanders fields and elsewhere.

Today, many wars later, Armistice Day is commemorated by so many people, but for different reasons. For world leaders, politicians and dignitaries, it is about marking democracy—marking the freedoms we have, and the sacrifices that were made. For veterans groups, it is about coming back together in solidarity to mark their service and their comrades. For veterans like me, it is about thinking back on former colleagues, friends and soldiers, many of whom are no longer here with us today. For families, it is about handing medals down and wearing them with pride. For the rest of us, it is simply about saying thank you.

One of the most poignant experiences of my life took place last summer, in June, at the D-day 75 commemoration in Portsmouth. It was a spectacular, magnificent event that had everything: royalty, Presidents, Chancellors and Prime Ministers; fantastic fly-pasts; ships in the Solent; and brilliant stage shows. But for me it was all about those wonderful veterans, resplendent in their immaculate uniforms, polished boots, polished medals and shiny brass. The twinkle in their eye was matched only by the brilliance of the sunshine.

Talking to these heroes, these living legends in their 90s and 100s, two things really struck me. The first was a sense of “fuss”, as they wondered, “Why all the fuss? Why are the Government and all these nations going to so much trouble for us?” They had a sense of bewilderment, as they thought, “We were just doing our job.” Funny thing that, they did their job and fantastically so. Bizarrely, they also had a sense of shame. When I scratched the surface with many of these fantastic people, I found it was a sense of shame that they had lived long and fulfilling lives whereas so many of their friends and comrades never came home. That is exactly why we remember these important events on Armistice Day. We do so to pay homage to those who have gone before and to those whom we owe so much.

Before I finish, I wish to make some quick points that I believe are relevant to today. First, I was proud earlier this year to introduce the Desecration of War Memorials Bill to this House with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), a good friend of mine. It is absolutely right that we bring that legislation into law. Secondly, the Government, in their 2019 manifesto, were clear that they wanted to bring the armed forces covenant into statute. I absolutely endorse and support it, and look forward to the Bill coming to this House in January or February next year. I will be supporting it, as will the all-party groups, I am sure.

Lastly, I am clear in my mind that when someone serves as a soldier in this country—when they wear the uniform, bear arms, serve the Crown and go on operations—they are British, wherever they come from. I want to make the point right now: this nonsense about visa fees for Commonwealth soldiers must stop. I also hope that we can be magnanimous in giving an amnesty to our Fijian friends who still suffer today. I am grateful for the opportunity to be here, after many years of service, and I thank all those who have gone before.

3.52 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), and I join him in hoping that we can achieve an amnesty for the Fijian soldiers, who have suffered from bureaucracy and have lost out greatly as a result. It is also an honour to follow the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), whose contribution was moving indeed.

I joined the service in Roehampton on Sunday. It was small but moving service at the memorial on Putney heath, where we remembered the names of all those who had died during the wars. I also remembered the loss in my own family. There is a sadness at the heart of my family, which stems from a moment in 1915, when a military wife, my great-grandmother, stepped off a boat. She was six months pregnant, she had a two-year-old and she was going home to Ireland to give birth to her child. As she stepped off that boat, she was given a telegram that told her that her husband had died. He had died in battle in Ahwaz, in modern-day Iran, in the Mesopotamian campaign. He was Major Reginald Bond, my great-grandfather. So my grandmother never knew her father and my mother never knew her grandfather. She remains extremely sad and feels the loss of that to this day, because the effect of war carries on through generations.

It was my honour to be an aid worker in Bosnia during the war there and for many years afterwards. I saw the devastating impact of war both at the time and

[Fleur Anderson]

afterwards. I saw the importance of building peace and, in order to do that, of remembrance every day, every year. That is why it is so important that we have these moments of commemoration and remembrance across our country, and that is why it is so important that we are having this debate.

I am grateful for this opportunity to speak on remembrance, and to celebrate and remember our armed forces in a year when we mark 75 years since victory was achieved. I want to pay tribute to our armed forces, to the forces families and to veterans. We expect the highest standards and values of our armed forces, and in turn, they continuously display those values of courage, integrity, loyalty, discipline and selfless commitment to our country. That has been vividly highlighted recently by the covid-19 response. From the very beginning, the military stepped up and provided assistance to our frontline NHS services, and I thank them for that.

In my constituency of Putney, we are honoured to have an excellent Royal Marine Reserve unit based in Southfields. The Royal Marine Reserve is an integral part of the Royal Marines, with members of the reserve having served in recent operations in the middle east and been deployed on exercises that take them from the jungles of central America to the Arctic circle. I pay tribute to the bravery and dedication that those volunteers show for our country.

I also pay tribute to all those non-combatant civilians who have died in conflict. Warfare devastates all members of communities, including those in my constituency during the second world war, when 81 people were killed and 248 were injured when a bomb fell on a dance hall on Putney High Street. I am sure it was aimed at Putney bridge, but it killed so many people by mistake.

One hundred and two years ago, the armistice that ended the first world war and brought the devastation of that conflict to a close was signed. On this Armistice Day, we must remember the sacrifice of those who fought, and we must continue to strive for and redouble our efforts to work for a world that is free of conflict, and free of violence, and does not devastate families for generations to come.

3.57 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), to take part in the debate and to listen to so many poignant and touching speeches with so many memories.

On Sunday, I attended the Remembrance Sunday parade at Nothe Fort in Weymouth in my constituency. During the two-minute silence, I found myself reflecting, as I do every year, on various military missions, jobs and roles. This year, it was the special forces that took my mind. I am sure that Members will recall the storming of the Iranian embassy back in 1980, when I was serving as a young soldier. Then, we held in awe the dash, daring and courage of the handful of our special forces who put all their training into practice, to devastating effect. As if we needed reminding, the remarkable Royal Marines from the Special Boat Service pulled off a similar coup off the Isle of Wight recently, roping down on to a tanker at night to rescue a crew threatened by violent stowaways.

What is so extraordinary is that we hardly, if ever, get to know the names of these brave men of our special forces, even if they fall in the course of their duty. They

just do their job quietly and professionally, seeking no reward other than the unique bond that exists between those who serve. These men are drawn from the best who serve on land and sea and in the air in our country, all of whom are prepared to lay down their lives for our freedom, just like their predecessors in two world wars and countless other conflicts, including those in Northern Ireland and the Falklands.

On this Armistice Day, many fine words have been spoken in support of our armed forces, and rightly so, but it falls to us, the politicians, to ensure that words are supported by actions, for it is we who put our courageous men and women in harm's way. "Judge a man by his actions," my father used to say. In this instance, the action to which I refer is the action we must take to invest in our armed forces to ensure that they can fulfil their role and face future threats with confidence and the right equipment.

This is, rightly, a solemn occasion, but I would not be doing my duty if I did not impress on those on the Front Bench that spending 2%—or thereabouts—of GDP on defence is woefully inadequate. I hope that the hundreds of billions that we are spending on this pandemic will not affect the future funding of our armed forces. We live in a fast-changing and unstable world; who knows when we will have to react to another call to arms to meet our responsibilities?

On this special day, I pay tribute to all those who have served and made the final sacrifice. We are indebted to them and, as I have said, to those who serve today. We must never forget; neither must we in this House let them down.

4 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax). May I say how much I have enjoyed the contributions from all right hon. and hon. Members today? It has been one of those debates: I honestly believe—I know this will be your opinion as well, Madam Deputy Speaker—that this House shines when we speak about the things that bring us all together. It is always good to have an opportunity to do that.

I declare an interest as a former Ulster Defence Regiment soldier who served in the Province under Operation Banner when I was 18—I had a full head of hair then as well. I have fond memories of that, but that is another story for another day. It was my honour to put on the uniform and serve Queen and country in that way.

What a different Remembrance Sunday we had this year. I have never in my life encouraged people to stay at home during the service, yet time and again in the run-up to Remembrance Sunday the girls in the office were saying, "I am sorry, but the British Legion is very clear this year: we can have only 15 people laying wreaths at the memorial and we cannot have big crowds." It is hard to do that, because usually when we speak to people we tell them to get up, wrap up and stand up, and they always do in great numbers. But this year it was very different.

I was privileged, as the MP for Strangford, to be able to attend staggered services throughout the constituency. At each, the council and the Royal British Legion had ensured that no more than 15 invited guests were in attendance. We were well distanced, as elderly veterans stood in the vicinity with their backs as straight as age would allow and tears in their eyes as they cast their

minds back to those they had loved and lost. It moves us greatly—we have all spoken of it and others will speak of it as well—when we look back on those veterans who gave their all and remember them.

Northern Ireland is a place of service, with so many having served in the armed forces—as many hon. and gallant Members have mentioned; in particular I mark out the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) as a dear, gallant friend and someone in the House whom I hold in high regard for his courage—the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Prison Service. There is no governmental estimate of the veteran population, but the Royal British Legion has estimated that it is roughly 115,000 people in Northern Ireland, in a population of 1.8 million—and we should take into account the fact that a fifth of the population is under 16. That means that 12.5% of our population has served our nation. I, my party—the Democratic Unionist party—and many Members from both sides of the Chamber wish to make sure that the veterans of Northern Ireland get equal recognition and help from the Government. We look forward to that happening.

I am very pleased to have had the opportunity, over the past few years since I became an MP, to run a coffee morning for the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association. We do it every year, but this year we could not do it because—let us be honest—we could not bring the people together. They are a vulnerable group of people, including the mothers of those who have served and some of those who served in the past. Ever mindful that we could not butter a scone, pour a cup of coffee or tea, or give out the Irish stew that we always give out as well, we wrote to all the groups and companies across the Strangford constituency, and this year we raised some £5,000—without even buttering a scone. It is tremendous. The people of Strangford have been continuously generous; I thank them and I thank in particular the organiser of SSAFA, Georgie Carlisle, and all those who have the good old-fashioned British values of service and duty. Their passion and dedication are truly an inspiration to me.

I am pleased to see the support that has been given to the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill, legislation for here on the mainland. I thank the Minister for his work and say that I supported the Bill when it came forward. I make a plea to him tonight. I have spoken to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I understand that there is a willingness to ensure that Northern Ireland follows suit, and that would be good news for me and good news for all of our veterans.

We cannot have a speech such as this and leave out the 36th Ulster Division and the Battle of the Somme. Their devotion to duty won admirers from across the whole world. We also fought alongside two Irish divisions at that time, which shows that, before partition, we were all together. Would that we were altogether now.

In conclusion, we will remember them. That is our promise to them. We will, as the nation of Northern Ireland, continue to serve our Queen and country with distinguished honour, and all the veterans deserve honour in response. I know the path that must be trod, but I am asking this Government to tread it with us and with those deserving veterans. The veterans of Northern Ireland deserve the same as the veterans here on the mainland. Let us make that happen and let us honour them.

4.6 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and to hear the many contributions from right hon. and hon. Members from across this House. In particular, may I say how good it was to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart)?

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted much of normal life, not least Remembrance, but while we cannot be together in the way that we would normally like to be together to reflect on those who have given so much for our country—our veterans and those serving in the military—we have done so in our own quiet way. This pandemic has highlighted to us the crucial role that our armed forces play not just in protecting our country on the frontline, but in many of our country's biggest logistical challenges, too. Just last week, we saw the Army help roll out mass testing in Liverpool. Earlier this year, they played their part in establishing the new NHS Nightingale hospitals, including Harrogate, serving my constituency. Before the pandemic, when we were threatened by flooding in Ilkley, the Yorkshire Black Cats Regiment helped establish temporary flood barriers.

The armed forces community is a crucial part of my constituency of Keighley and Ilkley. Keighley is, of course, the original home of Captain Sir Tom Moore. We are all so proud of Captain Tom's service to our country and, of course, of his recent galvanising impact in bringing the country's heart together in helping to fundraise for our beloved NHS.

Last year, I was delighted to meet the Keighley armed forces and veterans breakfast club, which is one of the growing network of clubs where veterans and those serving in the military can come together and share stories, and I have heard many from them. Earlier this year on Armed Forces Day, I met my constituent Luke Davison from the 3rd Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment. Luke joined the armed forces at the age of 16. Having completed two tours of Afghanistan, he is now 31 and a veteran. Luke told me about the struggles that he faced after leaving the forces, settling into civilian life and finding a new purpose. I know that Luke has gone on to be heavily involved in bringing the people of Keighley together to celebrate Armed Forces Day. I am sure that all Members will congratulate him on doing that.

Attitudes towards our veterans are changing. Veterans have a wealth of transferable skills and employers want to hire them, but it is incumbent on us all to do everything we can to defend, protect and support our armed forces veterans. I am proud to see the steps that the Government are taking. Those who served in our armed forces put their lives on the line to save and protect us, and we must do whatever we can to show them our gratitude. Let us take a moment today to remember those whom we have lost and thank our armed forces and veterans for their service.

A couple of years ago, I was honoured to visit Tyne Cot cemetery on the outskirts of Passchendaele in Belgium, where those from across the Commonwealth who fought together to protect our freedoms now lie in rest together. It was an incredibly moving experience. Let me quote the words that I saw on the grave of a young private who died in 1918 aged just 19, and was also from the West Yorkshire regiment: "Sunshine and shadows pass, but loving memories ever last". We will remember them.

4.10 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the moving and powerful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore).

I live in the town of Coldstream on the banks of the River Tweed. It was there in 1650 that General Monck formed a regiment to march south and restore Charles II to the thrones of Scotland and England. When Monck died in 1670, his regiment took as its name the Coldstream Regiment of Foot Guards. Today it is the oldest continuously serving regiment in the British Army.

Members will be accustomed to seeing the Coldstream Guards in their red coats and bearskins at trooping the colour, but that image is misleading. They are a true fighting force. They captured New York city during the American war of independence, fought Napoleon in Egypt and Portugal and were in the Crimea. They fought on the western front in the first world war. In the second world war, they fought in France, the middle east and north Africa. They were sent to Malaya, Aden, Northern Ireland, the Gulf, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Their history is the history of British warfare.

People in the Scottish Borders are proud of our link with the Coldstream Guards. It is when we discover a link with the past that the pages of history come alive. We all have war memorials in our constituencies. The cenotaph at Jedburgh Abbey, the statue of victory in Wilton Lodge Park in Hawick and the stone cross towering above Ettrick Terrace in Selkirk are just three of the scores to be found across the Scottish Borders. They are landmarks that we have known since childhood. But it is when we go up to them and read the names inscribed on them that the real significance hits us—when we see two or even three men with the same surname, and imagine what the impact of that loss must have been on that family.

The people who erected these memorials were not commemorating historical events; they were honouring their sons and grandsons, brothers and fathers, friends and neighbours. They were making the memory of their sacrifices permanent landmarks. In today's debate, and in services and events held around the country, we are playing our part in keeping the memory of those sacrifices alive.

The pandemic has undoubtedly disrupted our acts of remembrance. It is harder to come together as we usually do, but in time we will be able to come together again and to enjoy our lives as before. We will be able to see our friends and families, and enjoy going to the pub, to a restaurant, on holiday or to the cinema. We have all taken these freedoms for granted all our lives. They are freedoms that were won for us in battles against tyranny by young men whose names are inscribed on war memorials, and they are freedoms and pleasures that those young men were never able to know again, after they left their homes and families behind to go to war. When we are once again able to go out, live our lives and enjoy our freedoms, it will be as appropriate a time as any to pause for a moment and to say with feeling, "We will remember them."

4.13 pm

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I join colleagues in thanking all those who currently serve and who have served previously, and, of course, those who served and

gave their lives for our freedoms. Freedom is not free. There have been huge sacrifices by our armed forces in pretty much every decade for the last 150 years. Today, of course, we think of the two great wars, but there have been other conflicts in which people from my constituency have served, including Korea, operations in Sierra Leone and ongoing operations in the Sahel right now. Of course, there has also been the distinguished service of many hon. and gallant Members in Northern Ireland, not least my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart).

If I may, I would like to go on a brief tour—not an operational tour, but a tour of thanks—of my constituency and talk about the huge contribution that Shropshire folk make to defence. First, MOD Donnington, which is a huge base, is the home of the 11th Signal Brigade, West Midlands, of the 15th Royal Logistic Corps and of other operations perhaps not so well known. There has been a huge investment in the Defence Fulfilment Centre in the last few years. Both uniformed and civilian personnel have made a huge contribution to the covid effort in making sure that kit and equipment is distributed around the country. I pay tribute to all those who have played a part in that effort and continue to do so. I would also like to recognise the work of the Royal Military Police, and in particular 174 Provost Company, Royal Military Police. The company is not particularly well known in the county of Shropshire, but it does a huge amount of work across the county and beyond.

I hope that those who are part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme RAF will take time at some point, post covid, to visit RAF Cosford. As many will know, it is the second largest operational RAF base in the world, with several thousand personnel and a range of activities contributing to UK defence and security, of which I will mention just a few now. We have the Defence School of Aeronautical Engineering, the Defence School of Photography, and we have an RAF band, which is good news. Of course, we—I say we, but I mean the UK—provide international personnel, not just UK personnel, with defence training, particularly in engineering. There is also the RAF School of Physical Training, perhaps somewhere I should visit more often, but I am none the less very proud to have it in my constituency. We have 605 Squadron, which many will know provides logistics and police personnel mobilisation in support of RAF commitments around the world. There is also No. 1 Radio School—without signals, where would we be? I pay tribute to them.

While the Minister for Defence People and Veterans is on the Front Bench, let me pay tribute to him and to his personal service in the armed forces. I say to him that I am pretty sure the Government will be smart enough not to move him out of the Government, but I hope, very selfishly, they will not promote him—although perhaps he could be promoted to Minister of State within the Department—but let him keep his veterans hat on, because he is doing a fantastic job in that role.

I want to put on record my thanks to all those related to the men—and it was mostly men at the time of the first world war—of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry. Over 5,000 fell in that awful war, and it then amalgamated into the Light Infantry and is now the Mercian Regiment. I pay tribute to the Mercian Regiment in Shropshire as well.

In my final few seconds, I want to pay tribute to all the women who serve in the armed forces. I am glad that we have had a particular highlight from my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) about her service and what she is going to do to ensure that we continue to expand the role of women in the armed forces. Freedom is not free, as I said when I started. We pay tribute to all those who have fallen, and we pay tribute to those who continue to serve.

4.19 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) as he pays tribute to all those who we must remember today in this debate, which is an important opportunity to reflect and to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice. It is also an opportunity to highlight ongoing need and pay tribute to those who provide support. I echo the calls for funding for veterans' charities, which was raised by my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood).

As a nation, when we came together in the shock and distress following the first world war and looked at the scale of loss, we saw that not a single family was left untouched by conflict. My own great-grandfather and his son, my great-uncle, served in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders infantry. I cannot imagine what they went through, but I remember and feel for those they left behind whose lives were so impacted by their loss. The truth is that when men—men then, but men and women today—step up and make that commitment to serve, they take their families with them, wherever they go, in their hearts, but they also bind, in part, their families to their fate.

I was made incredibly aware of that when, in a past life before I came to this place, I worked as a teacher in a boarding school and was in loco parentis for teenage girls, the daughters of military families. I think everybody here will remember where they were when they heard the shocking news on 9/11. I remember where I was. I was with them, and they felt it, in a way not experienced by other students. Calls home were made and anxious days followed. They were on alert as they connected with their homes and with their families across the world, wherever they might have been serving. I echo the petition presented today by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and his endorsement of the "Living in our Shoes" report regarding the important contribution that our military families make. It is so important that we support them.

Back in the day, there was little expectation of support and little understanding. In the late years of his life, a very well loved and remembered Eastbourne resident, Henry Allingham, who was the last surviving veteran of the great war and, for a short time, the world's oldest man, shared his experiences. Without testimonies such as his, we could not begin to understand and comprehend the experience of that generation, but just talking—a simple thing, really—makes a world of difference.

I wear my poppy with pride. It is the symbol of our remembrance, but it is also a very important way in which we can help to provide for our veterans through the Royal British Legion's poppy appeal. Eastbourne and Willingdon, my home constituency, is traditionally very generous. I hope that through that demonstration, our veterans see the great value that we place on their

service and our serving personnel see the great value that we place on their contribution. I hope, too, that it inspires those who would apply for a military life. I say that with some feeling as a patron of the Military Preparation College in Eastbourne. It is mission critical for me to know that in inspiring a new generation to serve our country, and potentially to put their lives on the line, we stand behind them, and the poppy says that to me.

One organisation in Eastbourne that stands behind our veterans is Blue Van, a charity that provides support—physical, mental and financial—for veterans in my constituency. It has been able to support over 50 local veterans, some of whom have gone so far as to say that without that organisation they would not be here today. I am, unusually, here today—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am sorry, but we have to leave it there—you have overrun the five minutes.

4.24 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): This Armistice Day, as we have done for 100 years, we remember those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice and given their lives for their country, and this year we remember 100 years since the interment of the unknown soldier in Westminster Abbey, and 100 years since Sir Edwin Lutyens' monumental Cenotaph was unveiled. Between 2014 and 2018 we marked the centenary of the first world war in so many extraordinary ways. I had the privilege of chairing the first world war centenary committee, which put in place a programme of commemoration marking the start of the conflict at St Symphorien and then an extraordinary series of cultural events such as "Lights Out" and the iconic poppy sculptures. We often struggle as a country to commemorate war, conflict and death, and I pay tribute to 14-18 NOW, the organisation that persuaded politicians that art could help a nation understand and connect emotionally and intellectually with an event that happened 100 years ago, and could help, I think for the first time, to engage the nation with how the first world war shaped a generation and generations to follow. Perhaps we should do that more often.

The format of remembrance this year may have changed, but the vast debt of gratitude we owe to those who serve and the families who support them does not, and I join those who have paid tribute to the Falkland Islanders and those who fought for their freedom, too. Members of organisations in my constituency, including the Royal British Legion, Basingstoke and Deane Veterans Club and many others, usually come together in an act of solemn worship in remembrance at our town memorial; this year we had to do things differently, but we still had acts of remembrance that were undiminished.

In today's debate we are not just marking Armistice Day as part of that but are also considering the petition calling for a further strengthening of the armed forces covenant, signed by more than 150 of my constituents. The armed forces covenant was introduced in 2011 and was a real statement of the moral obligation that exists between the nation, the Government and the armed forces. That commitment was further reinforced in the commitments this Government made at last year's election, including to acknowledge and commemorate the invaluable contribution of diaspora communities in the past and to recognise the contribution in the present day of so many from beyond our shores, such as the Gurkhas.

[Mrs Maria Miller]

Indeed, we should remember the contribution of the Commonwealth members of the armed forces today. More than 4,000 personnel from Commonwealth countries serve in our armed forces, and in my constituency I am proud to have one of the largest veteran Gurkha communities in the country. Many Nepali veterans, and, indeed, other Commonwealth veterans, want, after they have served, to continue to live here, but too often the cost of that can be daunting and at odds with the commitment and loyalty they have shown to our country. I hope the Minister will look carefully at the Royal British Legion campaign on behalf of those people, so that as a nation we can respect those who have chosen to serve our country in this way.

Caring for the health of our armed forces and veterans is a matter this Government take very seriously, and the armed forces covenant annual report sets out the real progress made, particularly in supporting veterans with mental health problems, with more than 17,000 veterans receiving specialist support and complex treatment. I know the Minister is aware that serving personnel can use the facility in my constituency at Parklands hospital in Basingstoke, home to an MOD unit providing mental health services for serving personnel. I met medical staff there and people who were receiving treatment from across the south-east of England. I also had the privilege to be invited to the opening of a new therapeutic garden there, which I hope I can invite the Minister to visit when conditions allow, because facilities like that can make a real difference to people's lives—hearing from medical professionals, such as Dr Karl Marlowe, and patients, the value of that facility is absolutely clear.

As well as remembering those who have fallen, we must remember those whom we continue to support. It is clear that this Government's commitment to the armed forces covenant is undiminished, but it is also clear that there is much more to do.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. To resume his seat no later than 4.33 pm, and with apologies to the almost 30 Members who did not get in to make their contributions, I call Elliot Colburn.

4.29 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and to speak in such an important debate. I begin by thanking the armed services community in Carshalton and Wallington. We often speak in this place about the importance of our armed forces and the debt of gratitude we owe to them as we honour the bravery and sacrifice of those men and women who fought for the peace and freedoms we enjoy today. I want to look at one of the areas where we can begin to repay that debt of gratitude: mental health support.

In doing so, I want to remember a very special man, my grandfather, Derek Highton, who sadly is no longer with us and did not live to see me elected to this place. My grandad Derek was devoted to Queen and country and keen to sign up as a member of the armed forces. I will never forget the story he used to tell my brothers and me when we were younger of the day he signed up for the Army. On arrival at the recruitment centre, he

was asked a number of personal questions and, all of a sudden, told to take a walk, have a think about what he had said and come back. He did so. He thought about the question he had been answering when he was interrupted and asked to leave—it was about his age, and he was too young. Like so many others during that time, he went back and made himself a bit older so that he could join and serve the country that he loved. Indeed, he did so during the Korean war.

On leaving the Army, soon after the Korean war, my grandad Derek served out the rest of his working life in the Metropolitan police, but he never lost his passion for the armed forces. To his dying day, he spent his free time researching and taking part in anything to do with his favourite regiment, the historic Rifle Brigade. He always had stories to tell about the armed forces, but it was not until I was older that I realised that he rarely, if ever, spoke about his own time in the Army. Later, my mum explained why. My grandfather, like so many others—those of us who have never served can scarcely imagine this—experienced true horrors and saw such horrific scenes that he lived with the mental scars for the rest of his life. Of course, in those days there was little, if any, mental health support for our veterans.

That is why I am so proud that the Government stand firm by the armed forces covenant, because it states that priority treatment should be given to veterans. I am proud, as someone who used to work in the national health service, that in 2015 the NHS updated its constitution to ensure that it reflected that responsibility. Indeed, NHS expenditure on veterans' mental health has nearly doubled in the last four years alone. In December 2018, NHS England announced an extra £10 million for a dedicated crisis service for veterans. That extra funding was also to enable the roll-out of the first ever veteran-friendly GP surgeries and hospitals. I welcome that, in the 2020 spring Budget, the Government announced a further £10 million for the armed forces covenant fund trust to support projects that support veterans' mental health.

We can never really express in words the debt of gratitude that we owe our veterans and people like my grandad Derek, but we can make up for it in the actions that we take and in making sure that we are there for them.

4.33 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Today has seen the House at its very best. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, the House has almost shone. Those who have served and continue to serve can rest assured that they have a powerful voice in this place. That voice was heard in the Minister's poignant opening speech and in the moving speech by my friend, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), when he bravely talked about his personal experiences of the horrors of war. It was there in the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), who reminded us of the innocent victims of war. It was there in the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who has made it his mission since he came to this place to speak up for our troops.

There was also hope in many of the contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) reminded us about clearing mines on the beaches of the Falkland Islands so that

families can now play where once there were bullets and mines. Let us therefore, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) asked, all come together tonight at 7 pm, look to the stars and remember our fallen.

On this day 100 years ago, the second anniversary of the armistice that ended world war one, the body of the unknown warrior was drawn in a procession to the Cenotaph. A new war memorial on Whitehall was then unveiled by King George V. At 11 o'clock, there was a two-minute silence, and the body was then taken to Westminster Abbey, where it was buried at the west end of the nave. The text inscribed on the tomb reads:

"They buried him among the kings because he had done good toward God and toward his house".

Since that day, wreaths of poppies, the symbol of remembrance and hope for a peaceful future, have been laid at the foot of the Cenotaph. Even though we have lost the first world war generation and those who fought in the second world war are fewer in number with each passing year, still they come to pay tribute to their fallen comrades. The scene is repeated in countless ceremonies in villages, towns and cities, where people of all ages put their differences aside for two minutes to remember our war dead. Without them, we would not be the free and fair democracy we are. Indeed, we might not even be debating in this Chamber this afternoon. For that alone, they deserve our eternal gratitude.

Remembrance Day, along with the anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day that we have seen this year, is a time when people are more aware of the presence of the armed forces in this country. However, as my right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Defence said, fewer and fewer people have any idea what it is like to serve in the armed forces, because fewer people know someone who is serving or has had military experience. That makes people less aware of our forces—their needs, their challenges—but every family, in its past, will have a connection with the forces in some way, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) set out.

I remember the picture of the Royal Scots on my grandparents' wall as I grew up. It was the regiment that my grandfather, a Welshman, served in during world war two. I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) mentioned the merchant navy and its contribution. My father-in-law, Roy Ockenden, left a note for his mother at the age of 15 to say he was going to sea to join the merchant navy. I know he is missed every day.

Remembrance is also an opportunity for people to show their appreciation for the work of our forces. However, to truly pay tribute to our forces men and women and the sacrifices they have made and continue to make, we must demonstrate, in our words and our deeds, that we value them and their families. That includes our reserves, our cadets, their families and employers, as well as our veterans, their widows and their families. We must make a commitment today to do everything in our power to demonstrate that.

I would like to mention briefly the petition to enshrine the military covenant in law, which has gathered more than 67,000 signatures. The petition asks for a statutory requirement for the provision of services such as housing and mental health support for veterans. That shows an engagement with our armed forces and is a testament to

how much our society values our service personnel. In 2010, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, promised to enshrine the covenant in law. Unfortunately, that decision was reversed in 2011. I believe that was a real missed opportunity to protect the rights of our service personnel, and I hope it will be revisited, as I know the Minister cares deeply about our veterans.

Remembrance, like so many other things, has been different this year. As many Members have said, large remembrance services and the usual gatherings at war memorials up and down the country have either been cancelled or been subject to social distancing. Covid has not only affected the events that normally take place across the nation; there have been other visible and physical differences. The common sight of the Royal British Legion's volunteers collecting donations for poppies at supermarkets and train stations and on high streets has been far less visible this year.

The poppy appeal is the largest fundraising campaign of the year for the Royal British Legion. Although it has adapted and raised more than a quarter of a million pounds through contactless donations, it has been difficult to fundraise during covid. This year, the Royal British Legion expects to see a fall in revenue. It will not be alone. It is estimated that one in 10 armed forces charities will be forced to close in the next 12 months. That comes at a time of increasing reliance on charitable aid. It is vital that we ensure that the forces charities are supported and that their loss of income is not felt by those who need their help.

We are remembering the past, but the armed forces can also be relied on to assist with modern issues. There is no better example than the covid test pilot in Liverpool. Some 2,000 troops have been sent to Liverpool to aid our civilian authorities there. Given the size of our armed forces, I echo calls for a promise from the Government that the covid deployment of our forces will not impact training, standing commitments or the forces' capabilities to respond to threats. If our forces are strained, more support must be given. I should be grateful if the Minister touched on what the Government are doing in his response. Covid has required the mobilisation of many of our reservists, as many Members have said. People have stepped in, in many different areas, proving how vital they are. They have helped, as we have heard, to transport PPE and to set up Nightingale hospitals. They have helped local authorities to set up and run Test and Trace centres. Three thousand reservists were called up in March, and the work that they do is vital. It is important that we remember them. We have many reasons to be proud of our reserve forces. I hope that the Minister can update the House on how many reservists have provided help during the pandemic and what is being done to help them move seamlessly from civilian life to service at such short notice.

Finally, I hope the Minister can will on charity funding in his response. He recently called on the Treasury to find funding for visas for Commonwealth veterans, which we welcome. Would he put in a word with Treasury Ministers to increase funding for veterans and military charities? As we have heard today, there are concerns across the House about the drops in fundraising for these vital charities. We would all appreciate some information about how we will fill these gaps so that all those to whom we have paid tribute today can access the support that they need.

[Chris Evans]

In debates of this nature there can be a tendency to focus on the problems that some veterans face, and it is right that we do so. However, we should never forget that, for most people, the forces experience is only positive. There are many veterans who make a huge contribution to their community in business and industry, and for that they should be celebrated by the entire House. This year, let us remember not only the armed forces personnel of the past but those of the present. Let us strive to support them so that they can continue to protect peace, our wellbeing and our society. Let us be there for them, as they have always been there for us.

4.42 pm

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): I thank the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) for, in what I believe is his first appearance at the Dispatch Box, a heartfelt summing-up of an interesting debate. For someone who came to the House to try to reset the relationship between this country, her military and her veterans, it has been an incredibly encouraging couple of hours. It is a privilege to close this debate on remembrance, to mark Armistice Day. Listening to some of the remarkable stories of service from colleagues reminds me, however, that war, however great, huge in scale, distant and complex, is fundamentally personal.

We are very good in this country at remembering. There are few places on earth more moving than a war memorial on Remembrance Sunday, but this year has been very different. Many veterans who would normally attend were self-isolating. I pay tribute to their efforts. I pay particular tribute to the Royal British Legion. A narrative has developed among some in my cohort of veterans against the larger charities in recent years. I must say that we would be in an incredibly dark place without the supreme commitment of charities such as the Royal British Legion over many, many years to those who have served this country. I pay tribute to their efforts, particularly at this time of year.

I want to respond to a couple of points made by the hon. Member for Islwyn and by others who made speeches today. I will write to the hon. Gentleman about the specific numbers of reservists, as I do not have that number to hand. Reserves are far more integrated into regular forces than ever before, but it is something that we can always do better. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces will write to hon. Gentleman about that.

Charity funding is something that we have discussed a number of times. Charities clearly face a challenging time—there are no two ways about that—and the increase in demand for services in charities is almost at the same rate. I am very clear that this nation has a duty to its service personnel and veterans. It is not a problem that should be farmed out to charities. This nation is doing more than it ever has done before on a statutory footing for those who serve, but I think the answer in the end is a blend between statutory and charity provision. That is more for another day.

If I may briefly talk about legislation that was raised by the hon. Member for Islwyn and a number of colleagues. I can confirm—there was a manifesto promise, and I have campaigned for this for some years now—that unless the armed forces covenant means something to

the people who need it and unless it is a tool in the hands of those who need it in this country, it is not really worth what we would like it to be. The truth is that some great work has been done, but it is clear that we need to legislate in the manner suggested by the hon. Gentleman. I can confirm that the Government will be bringing forward an armed forces Bill next year to legislate and further enshrine into law the armed forces covenant.

I want to respond to a few of the contributions today that I thought were particularly telling. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) made really valid points about mental health support. He is right about that and how much more money has gone into it now, but until every single serviceman and servicewoman leaves the military and knows where they can turn for mental support, knows that care pathway and that point of access, we still have some work to do, and we will not stop until we get there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) talked about the huge part played by military families. My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) also talked about covenant legislation and the issue around foreign and Commonwealth visa fees. My views on that are well known, however unpopular they may be within Government. I have had a personal view for some time, which has not changed since I became a Minister. I am confident that the Government will do their duty towards our foreign and Commonwealth brothers and sisters who served with us abroad over many years.

The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) talked about how life is never the same. It really is

“At the going down of the sun and in the morning” every day for our veterans’ families. That is why remembrance is so important.

I pay special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) for her contribution on the female experience of the military. I reiterate that it is not where I want it to be, either in the military or in veteran circles. We have more work to do on that. I say to her that things are changing, but she has a very powerful and relevant voice and I urge her to keep going in her campaigning on that issue.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and his family history, and to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), who talked about his grandmother.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) for her comments on Northern Ireland. I have repeatedly made it clear that my views and my commitment to this issue are completely unchanged from before I was a Minister. We heard today—and I will come on to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) in a moment—about how that conflict was painted very viscerally for individuals. There will be no resiling from the commitments that have been made. I have made that clear on a number of occasions. I am acutely aware that there comes a moment where that has to granulate into a reality for those who serve. We are fast approaching that moment. The Bill I introduced last week gave important commitments to that generation for the first time from a Government from this Dispatch Box, but there is more to do. The Prime Minister is crystal clear in his commitment on this issue and I am confident he will follow through.

Unfortunately, my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and I have been friends for far too long. *[Interruption.]* He has finally woken up. As conflict has changed, with cameras and so on, it is easy for people to come home and think, “My generation did x, y and z in Afghanistan” or wherever it may be, but I would just say to him that all we ever did was try to stand on the shoulders of our predecessors who fought in incredibly difficult environments and incredibly difficult and complex situations.

There was the story about the little girl. There is something very difficult about little girls and conflicts. I was out with a friend last weekend and we talked about what remembrance means. I said, “Does anything stick with you from those days?” and he remembered a little girl who similarly lost both arms and both legs and was dying. Her father would not give the little girl to us because he wanted her to be a martyr and would not let us save her life.

What is remembrance to me? I will be honest: some parts of remembrance I do find pretty difficult. When I first came back from some of the roughest tours in Afghanistan, I simply could not watch, because the discrepancy between what people said in this place and how it actually felt to serve, or to be a veteran or the family of a veteran in this country, was too great. However, we are getting better.

The creation of the Office for Veterans’ Affairs is a significant moment, but I say very gently to colleagues both inside and outside Government: do not underestimate what this means to people who are watching this debate. Do not underestimate the commitments we have made not only to the generation I was talking about from Northern Ireland, but to all those who have served. There is a community out there who are the best of us.

They care so much about this country that they actually signed up to serve. Some of their experiences have been wholly unacceptable. We are changing that, but we must redouble our efforts because, if we get it wrong now, having given them hope, that feeling that I used to have will only become worse.

Ultimately, all these things are political. Enshrining the armed forces covenant in law is a political choice. Reconciliation in Northern Ireland is a political choice. So we can remember properly, not through Remembrance Day itself and photographs and all the rest of it, but by supporting those efforts, by parking selfish ambition or any personal agenda with one special interest, and by taking difficult decisions for the greater good. That greater good was what those patriots fought for and died to protect. That is how we remember and truly honour their sacrifice—for it is actions, not words, that matter.

We will remember them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We will remember them, and we will continue to remember them and be grateful for their service and sacrifice. This has been an absolutely superb debate. Without their service and sacrifice, this debate and our democracy could easily have been extinguished.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered remembrance, UK armed forces and society.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We will now suspend for a full three minutes. Please leave with care.

4.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19

4.56 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I beg to move, That this House has considered covid-19.

Last Wednesday, this House came together to vote in favour of a new time-limited set of national restrictions across England—our strategy to suppress the virus, support the economy, education and our NHS until a vaccine can be deployed, and in doing so, to ensure that the NHS was not overwhelmed. It is clear that, in tackling this virus, there are no easy or simple choices for anyone. While Members may differ in the perspective they take on what is the right balance to strike, as we would expect in our open and vibrant democracy, it is important to say that it is clear that all Members of this House share a common objective, which is to beat this disease and see our country flourish once again. As Members will know, I entirely respect and recognise the sincerity and strength of feeling of all Members on this most difficult issue, irrespective of the stance they take on it.

Difficult though they are, entailing further sacrifices, the steps that this Government and this House took last week were the right ones, because the alternative of not acting would have been far worse. Throughout the pandemic, we have always sought to base our decisions on evidence, data and scientific advice, but we must also recognise that this is a disease about which we have learnt more every day and about which we knew nothing a year or so ago. Throughout, we have always been willing, and we must remain willing, to reflect on and adapt to changing scientific evidence and scientific debate, and to move with that debate.

The evidence we faced last week before the Prime Minister's announcement was stark and changing rapidly: an R rate above 1 in every region and more than 100 cases per 100,000 of the population. The data indicated that the number of people in acute hospital beds in England was due to exceed NHS surge capacity in the forthcoming weeks and, in some hospitals, the number of patients was already higher than at the peak of the first wave. To me, one thing was abundantly clear: our NHS was at risk of seeing demand exceed capacity if nothing was done.

There was a sharp acceleration in infections in September and October, as was the case across Europe, and, as we know, many of those infections lead to hospitalisation further down the line, with a roughly two-week lag. As Sir Simon Stevens, the chief executive of the NHS, recently set out, at the start of September there were around 500 people hospitalised with covid. By the start of October there were around 2,000 people hospitalised with covid, and by the start of November, that figure had sharply increased to around 11,000.

We were already at the point where hospitals were becoming very busy, and that was before the normal winter and flu-related demand. It appears that, with the new treatments that are being developed, more people are likely to walk out of hospital after treatment than sadly was the case during the first wave, and I am thankful for that, as I am sure the entire House is, but the fact remains that those people still need hospital treatment. Each day the R rate remains above 1 is

another day on which cases rise, with more hospital admissions, more patients deprived of other types of care and, tragically, more deaths.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very important point about the impact on hospitals. Does he agree that the knock-on impact on elective surgeries and care and treatment in our hospitals means that unless we keep the coronavirus rate under control, we could see other people with non-covid illnesses being adversely impacted in this wave of the pandemic as they were in the first wave? Indeed, in my constituency we saw a 26% increase in deaths from non-covid illnesses in the first nine months of this year.

Edward Argar: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. In taking the action we are taking to protect the NHS, we are of course also seeking to suppress the number of people who need hospitalisations to maintain the availability of those hospital beds for other people in dire need, exactly as she alludes to. I have to say to those who question the impact of this disease or its seriousness when someone gets it that I am reminded—as I suspect other Members will be—of the extraordinary dignity and suffering of the Lewis family in the Rhondda, who were on “Channel 4 News” and various other news outlets last week. Mr Lewis had lost his wife and his two sons in under a week to this disease. It was a truly dreadful story, and I have never seen a more dignified man than Mr Lewis when he was talking about it.

The latest R rate is between 1.1 and 1.3, so it was essential to take action to protect our NHS and to enable us, as my right hon. Friend said, to maintain the vital services for those without covid that sadly had to be paused in the first wave. From the Dispatch Box, I would like to take the opportunity once again—every time we are here it is right we do it—to thank all our staff in the NHS and care sectors for the incredible work they have done and continue to do in the face of these unprecedented challenges.

As I have set out, the virus remains a serious threat. We recorded more than 20,000 positive cases yesterday. Average daily hospital admissions currently stand at 1,366 and, sadly, yesterday we recorded more than 500 deaths—the highest death toll since mid-May. It is a painful reminder that the real battles are fought not here in this Chamber, but in our hospitals up and down the country and by those who are suffering from and fighting this dreadful disease. But in this Chamber, there are steps we can take that I believe will help them in that battle, and I believe that we were therefore right to act as we did.

Despite the seriousness of our current situation, these measures are time-limited. They legally expire 28 days after they were passed by the House—on 2 December. At that point, we will look to return to the tiered system, using local and regional data and trends to determine our response and adapt to local needs.

The measures in place are also quite different from last time. Schools and universities rightly remain open to avoid further disruption to education. People can establish childcare bubbles, take unlimited exercise and meet one person from a different household outside. More than that, however difficult it has been, I believe that we as a nation have made huge strides to better

overcome the challenges that these measures bring. However, I am acutely aware that for many people in our country any restrictions are still incredibly difficult, especially this second time around. They are difficult for our NHS and care home staff, who have shown such resilience but still face a difficult winter ahead; for the families who have not been able to see their loved ones and once again cannot meet them in the ways they would wish to; and for individuals who live alone and are still, despite support bubbles, having to cope with the challenges posed by these restrictions.

It has also, of course, been an especially tough time for the businesses that have had to close their doors just as they were coming back, and that is why we are providing an unprecedented package of economic measures, with more than £200 billion of financial support since March to protect lives and livelihoods in every region and nation of the United Kingdom. The package was recently described by the International Monetary Fund as

“one of the best examples of coordinated action globally”.

Of course I feel deeply for those businesses and individuals, and I appreciate the position they find themselves in, especially when they have done all they can to do the right thing. That was why it was important to extend the furlough scheme and to provide further support in extending the scheme for the self-employed.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Of course it is right that the furlough scheme and the support for the self-employed should be reinstated at the levels they were at in March, but the Minister will know—everyone will know—that there are a great many people in our country who did not qualify for the furlough scheme or the self-employed scheme, or whose businesses did not qualify for grants at the start and still do not. May I take this opportunity to remind him that a great many people are still without financial support and will find it increasingly difficult to make it through the coming weeks and months? Will he take that message back to his colleagues across the Government?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the way in which he made his points, which made, as ever, measured and reasonable. As I have said, I entirely understand—as anyone in this House will, from looking at their own casework and their constituents’ letters—the situations that some people still find themselves in, despite the unprecedented package of support that has been put in place. I know that he would not expect me to speak for the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but I know that my right hon. Friend will have heard the point that he has made. Indeed, other Members of this House have made it on other occasions on behalf of their constituents.

This tough emotional and economic toll is why we are determined to make every day count in our battle against the virus. Our NHS has been preparing for this second wave for months, and as we move into winter, it is better prepared than before, with 30,000 ventilators and billions of items of PPE, mostly made here at home. In that context, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who has done so much, as the Minister with responsibility for this area, to ensure that we have the PPE that we need at this time.

There are also over 13,000 more nurses and almost 8,000 more doctors, and £450 million is being spent as we speak to further upgrade accident and emergency departments. There is increased capacity in our hospitals, and the Nightingales are standing ready as an insurance policy.

What is more, we know more about the virus than before. We know how we can better stop it and how we can better treat it. We have therefore strengthened infection control procedures and, as a result, we are driving down hospital-acquired infections. We have also improved clinical techniques, and I pay tribute to the clinicians and scientists who have driven these developments. As a result, the number of people surviving covid in hospital is up, as I said earlier. But of course, an increase in survival rates means that the pressure on NHS beds remains high. Equally concerning to the House will be the toll this disease takes not just on immediate physical health but on mental health. Our medical community is also working hard to understand the impact of so-called long covid and the potential for long-term chronic conditions resulting from the illness, even when people may have felt they were unaffected when they had it.

In social care, too, we have rightly taken important steps to protect people in care and those who care for them. Our social care winter plan, led by my hon. Friend the Minister for Care, strengthens protections in social care, including the provision of PPE, regular testing and updated systems for safe discharge. Those will be crucial in the months to come. She recently set out the latest guidance for care home visits, which sought to strike the incredibly difficult balance of providing vital protections for the health and wellbeing of our most vulnerable people, while protecting the people who work there and seeking to allow those vital family visits.

We have also built the largest testing capacity of any country in Europe. From an almost standing start in the spring, we have conducted some 34 million tests so far, and yesterday our polymerase chain reaction testing capacity stood at 504,491. More than 10 million people in the UK have been tested at least once through NHS Test and Trace, and our NHS covid-19 contact tracing app is approaching 20 million downloads. In Stoke-on-Trent and Liverpool, we are piloting cutting-edge lateral flow tests, which can deliver a result on infection in just 15 minutes. Starting yesterday, we are rolling out twice-weekly testing for all NHS staff, using a range of testing technologies so that we can better seek to keep both staff and patients safe. On Monday, the Secretary of State wrote to 67 directors of public health who had expressed an interest to him to make 10,000 tests immediately available to other areas across the country and to make lateral flow tests available for local officials and devolved Administrations according to local needs, at a rate of 10% of their population per week.

Those bold new steps are a key weapon in our battle against the virus, but of course I know that the hopes of the nation are, understandably, pinned on the possibility of a safe and effective vaccine. That felt another step closer on Monday, as we all welcomed the announcement from Pfizer and BioNTech of a vaccine that they state is more than 90% effective. As an early mover, the UK has already secured 40 million doses of that vaccine. It is important to note that it is just one of many vaccines in development, and we have placed orders for 300 million

[Edward Argar]

further doses from five other vaccine candidates that are yet to report phase 3 results. I always seek to sound a note of caution at this Dispatch Box and in the media, and it is important that I echo the words of caution from the Secretary of State yesterday: the full safety data for the Pfizer and BioNTech vaccine is not yet available, and our regulator the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the Secretary of State will not approve any vaccine until it is proven clinically safe. This is a promising step forward, but we must remain cautious. So until we can roll out a proven vaccine, we must continue to follow the existing rules of “hands, face, space” because this remains a deadly virus.

In closing, let me say that in recent months this country has faced some tough and challenging times. We continue to face tough and challenging times, and many up and down our country have made huge sacrifices and continue to do so, be they individuals, families or businesses. I pay tribute to them all. There are no easy solutions, but we have risen to and beaten such challenges in the past, although different ones, and we can do so again, through a unity of spirit, by coming together as a country and by our shared determination to do the right thing. The recent announcement of a potential vaccine offers hope for the future, and while we pursue that prospect at speed, our greatest strength lies in the common sense, determination and resilience of the people of our great country. I am convinced that, with those and together, we will beat this dreadful disease.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call Justin Madders, and to help Members plan a little better, let me say that the time limit will come in after Sir Desmond Swayne, who sits fifth on the call list. So Members who are between five and 10 on the list will have five minutes, and those after 10 will have four minutes. The time limit may be reduced later on, depending on what Dame Rosie Winterton wishes to do.

5.14 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is now 293 days since the Secretary of State first came to this House and spoke about the emerging threat of covid-19. Since then, thousands of lives have been lost, both directly and indirectly, and billions of pounds have been spent. There has been great personal sacrifice, and we have all heard so many stories of individual courage and dedication that have been an inspiration, but there is no doubt that people are now weary. Not one corner of this isle or one aspect of our lives has been immune to the impact of this virus, so the news this week that there may be a way out of this nightmare has given people hope, and we all need hope at this difficult time.

However, that hope should not obscure the truth that we are in the midst of a second wave, so we must be sure to maintain vigilance. As we heard from the Minister, as of yesterday there were 20,000 new infections; more than 13,000 people are in hospital in England, with more patients in hospital in the north of England than there were at the peak of the first wave; and sadly, there were another 532 deaths yesterday, the highest number in one day for approximately six months. That is another 532 families who have lost a loved one, and among the huge numbers we talk about, we should never lose sight of the fact that each one of those numbers is a person.

With the news today that we have now passed 50,000 deaths since the start of the pandemic, we know that the scale of human loss has been immense.

Those figures remind us that we still have a long way to go. Hope for the future is important, but it is not guaranteed, and neither is the end likely to be reached before we enter the difficult winter months, during which it is sadly likely that more people will catch the virus and more will die. It is right that plans are now being made for the roll-out of the vaccine, but that should not mean we take our eye off the ball when it comes to the immediate and pressing challenges that this virus presents. I know that time is at a premium today, so I will not detain the House for too long, but I want to say a few words about some of those immediate challenges.

Every challenge in the NHS is faced, first and foremost, by its workforce, so I will start by paying tribute—as the Minister did—to everyone in the NHS: the doctors, the nurses, the many allied health professionals, the porters, and everyone who has gone above and beyond over these past nine months to keep the NHS going. We know that working in the NHS is never easy, but the pressure, the workload and the trauma this year are of a scale and intensity we have never seen before. Not only must we show our gratitude to those who have given their all; we must demonstrate that we are listening to them by addressing their well-documented and legitimate concerns. That has to be more than a clap or a badge: there has to be tangible recognition that there are only so many times people can go to the well before they become physically and mentally exhausted. It is clear that burn-out is a real risk, as 14 health unions and royal colleges warned in their letter to the Prime Minister earlier this week. They say that asking staff to carry on at this level of intensity is “increasingly unrealistic”. We have to listen to that warning.

Addressing workforce fatigue is not just the right thing to do: it is the only thing to do if we want the NHS to continue to be the jewel in this nation’s crown. I hope that the rumours of another two-year pay freeze for NHS staff are just that—rumours—because if that were true, it would send the most appalling message about the value this Government place on the NHS workforce. When the Minister winds up the debate, I will be delighted if she can put that particular rumour to bed.

Of course, NHS staff should be properly rewarded for the work they do, but they also need to be properly supported when doing the job. We cannot have a repeat of the obscenity of doctors and nurses bringing in home-made PPE while UK manufacturers are selling it overseas. I know that general practice is particularly concerned about the availability of PPE this coming winter, and while many of these debates have rightly focused on the hospital-based issues that covid presents, we should not underestimate the demand there has been on GPs this year. We know it is always the case that, when general practice struggles, the impact is felt elsewhere in the NHS. It is not yet clear what role GPs will play in the roll-out of any vaccine, but any additional demands placed on them in that respect must be matched by additional support.

We welcome the news that at last, many months after we first suggested it, there will be routine testing of frontline NHS staff. The Healthcare Safety Investigation

Branch report on the transmission of covid in hospital settings, which came out last month, stressed the importance of increasing pillar 1 testing capacity, and it is a matter of deep regret that we are only just starting to see that now. Let us hope that that pledge does not face the same problems with availability that we had in the social care sector.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I had hoped to speak in this debate but, unfortunately, there are limited flights to Belfast. Does the hon. Member agree that there needs to be additional testing in the care home sector, particularly for family members who could be designated as care workers? I know that the Minister brought forward a pilot scheme. Does the shadow Minister agree that that should be rolled out right across the United Kingdom and that loved ones should get access to their family members in the care home setting?

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. The recent developments in rapid testing give us the ideal opportunity to allow relatives of those in care homes to go in and see them and give them the support that they have been so sadly lacking in recent months. None of us could fail to be moved by the many representations we have had from family members who have been unable to see their loved ones for many months.

On the health and social care workforce, we know, sadly, that over 600 staff have lost their lives so far to covid-19. They have paid the ultimate price just for doing their job. It is important that lessons are learnt about how we stop transmission, and it is right that the Government opened up their life assurance scheme to all health and social care staff, but over half of all families who have lost someone to the virus have still not received their payment, so we need the Government to be much more proactive in making sure that everyone who is entitled to that payment receives it.

Let us support the staff, but let us not forget the impact on patients as well. We know that the NHS could cope with the first wave only because so many planned operations were cancelled. We know that the need to operate in a covid-secure environment presents additional challenges to the NHS in reaching previous levels of activity. We know that before the pandemic started, waiting lists were already climbing to record levels. Covid-19 has accelerated that increase so that by August this year, over 100,000 patients were waiting over a year just to start treatment. Cancer Research UK estimates that around 3 million people are waiting for breast, bowel or cervical screening, and there were over 1.2 million patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of August. We need to hear what the plans will be to address these spiralling waiting lists, and we need a cast-iron guarantee that no patient will be discharged from hospital into a care home if they have tested positive for covid-19.

I turn to what awaits us in a few weeks' time, because we all hope that the current lockdown will end on 2 December as planned, and as promised, I believe, by the Prime Minister. If it does end on that date, it seems likely that we will still have some system of tiered restrictions. That is another area where we need to see improvements, because the Government's approach to restrictions to date has at times been contradictory, muddled and rushed. I accept that the Government

have had on occasions to move quickly, sometimes because of a rapidly changing picture—but sometimes, regrettably, because of leaks to the press too. Of course, we would not expect things in this kind of situation to be perfect, but they can be better than they have been.

The time that this lockdown buys us should be used not just to fix test and trace, to prepare for a roll-out of the vaccine and to fine-tune the mass testing pilots, but to set out a clear and consistent framework for determining and implementing future restrictions. The Minister and his colleagues have spent many Monday afternoons in Committee Rooms with me and others going through increasingly convoluted and amended statutory instruments dealing with each new restriction, often published only hours before they became law and always debated weeks after they came into force. We cannot go back to that style of governing. Public trust is eroded when decisions are not made in a transparent and timely manner, so when the Government decide what their exit strategy for the lockdown will be, they also need to consider what the process will be for making and communicating those decisions. It is critical that individuals and businesses get sufficient advance warning in future to enable them to prepare properly for whatever comes next. This point is as much about process as it is about substance, but the process matters, because restrictions need to be tested in this place; if they do not stand up to scrutiny here, we cannot expect them to stand up to scrutiny out there.

I want to say a few words about test, trace and isolate. The Serco side of the system is underperforming badly, and the decision to place responsibility for mass testing into the hands of local directors of public health is a welcome one. It recognises, perhaps belatedly, where the real expertise lies. The latest figures for the national test and trace system are frankly shocking, with 26% of test results received within 24 hours. We should not forget that the Prime Minister said we would have all results turned around in that timescale by the end of June, yet the figures have been getting worse in recent weeks, not better. We know how important it is for results to be turned around quickly if we are ever to get test and trace playing the part it was meant to play in controlling the spread of the virus. Ministers can boast about record capacity, but capacity is meaningless if the results are not coming back quickly enough to be effective.

Let me turn to the contact tracing system itself. In the most recent weeks for which figures are available, 40% of close contacts were not reached and asked to self-isolate, amounting to over 130,000 people in one week. That is a failure. When every one of us in here has those difficult and distressing conversations with our constituents about the restrictions that we currently face, we need to reflect on that failure, and question not only why these unproven private providers have been given the task in the first place, but why they continue to be responsible for a system that they are clearly not delivering on. Every scientific adviser said that relaxing lockdown measures would work only if we had an effective test and trace system in place, yet on just about every measure the system is going backwards. How much longer will Ministers tolerate this failure? However, whoever is doing the contact tracing, that is only half the story. Without people adhering to the rules of self-isolation thereafter, the success of the entire system is in doubt.

[Justin Madders]

Yesterday when Baroness Harding gave evidence to the joint inquiry of the Science and Technology Committee, and Health and Social Care Committee, made the important point that the reason people were not self-isolating was that they could not afford the loss of income, rather than a refusal to comply. She also made the rather remarkable claim that the surge in cases that we have seen in the last couple of months was not anticipated, which I thought was an incredible admission.

The Committees also heard from Professor Sir John Bell, who said that the self-isolation system was “massively ineffective” and spoke about using the increased testing capacity perhaps to cut short the self-isolation period for negative cases. No doubt the Government are actively considering that, but we are still left with the need to do more to encourage people who test positive to self-isolate.

In September a report for the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies concluded that self-isolation rates would be improved if additional financial support were available, ensuring that those required to self-isolate—let us not forget that these are people who are doing the right thing—are not penalised and do not experience financial hardship when doing so. This survey found that only 18% of people with symptoms self-isolated, and that figure went down to just 11% of those told to self-isolate by Test and Trace after coming into contact with a confirmed case. I know that these are preliminary figures and that other studies have suggested slightly higher levels of compliance, but no study that I have seen has shown levels anywhere near close enough to where they need to be for us to have an effective system.

The entitlement to a self-isolation payment is tied to being in receipt of certain benefits, which means that a significant number of people do not qualify, although those not in receipt of those benefits and those who do not receive contractual sick pay can also receive statutory sick pay or employment and support allowance. But that is frankly not good enough. SSP is far below the rate set for a self-isolation payment. The Secretary of State famously said that he could not live on such an amount, so we should not be surprised when we see low rates of compliance, because asking those who are not eligible for a self-isolation payment to accept a significant drop in their pay for a fortnight inevitably causes hardship and discourages compliance. I urge the Government seriously to consider doing more to encourage people to self-isolate.

It is a massive oversight that those notified through the app are not entitled to the payment. I understand that the Government are actively looking at this, but given that it is over six months since we started hearing talk about the world-beating app, it is staggering that we are only now looking at how properly to tie it in with support for self-isolation. Action on that issue cannot come soon enough.

There has been newspaper speculation that the actual period of self-isolation might be cut, with a suggestion that it could end at 10 days following a negative test. A report in *The Guardian* on Monday says that a compromise was “cooked up” to placate Dominic Cummings. Frankly, he ought to be the last person in government to be determining the self-isolation rules, given that he has found it impossible to follow them himself. Any change to this period should be based on medical advice, so I do hope that we get clarity from the Government during

the wind-ups that any decisions on shortening the self-isolation period will be based on advice from the chief medical officer, rather than any Dom, Dick or Harry who happens to be in the Prime Minister’s office.

I hope that those on the Government Benches have been listening today and considered the issues and the suggestions that I have made, as none of us wants to be back here in another month or two debating another lockdown because the time this lockdown has bought was wasted. We do not want to be here talking about how the second wave saw us with one of the highest death rates in the world again, and we do not want to be here in a few months’ time seeing cases rising again because demand was not anticipated. We all want to hear that cases are falling, that hospital admissions are reducing, and that other NHS patients are getting their treatments quicker. Human endeavour has given us the opportunity to get to that place. While reaching that destination is not entirely within the Government’s gift, it would be inexcusable if we failed to get there because of incompetence or neglect on the Government’s part. The people would never forgive that, and nor should they.

5.30 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I pay tribute to all those in my own constituency who have helped our community through the pandemic—the medical and emergency staff, other key workers, our volunteers, and the neighbours who have made all the difference.

I want to say a few words about how we can ensure that public confidence in our policy remains high, but first I will make a few comments on the current lockdown. I reinforce my hon. Friend the Minister’s point that when we leave the national lockdown on 2 December, we are not going into a national free-for-all in the run-up to Christmas. Ministers must make it very clear that we are transitioning back to a regional tiered system, because over-optimism, just as if people believe that a vaccine coming means they do not have to obey the rules, would be very dangerous to public health.

But if we are going to move successfully back to the tiered system, we have to deal with some of the illogical rules that still exist despite the best efforts of Ministers. This is not frivolous—it is important in getting people to conform to the restrictions that are in place. For example, we want people to play sport, so do we really believe that a spaced round of golf is more dangerous to public health than people going to a supermarket? When it comes to religious observation, is it credible that people who go to church for private worship and are properly spaced are a greater danger than the same number with the same spacing who take part in a service? These issues are important to a lot of people out there. The Government need to deal with some of these illogicalities if we are to deal with conformity.

There is something that Ministers can do immediately, and that is about free testing for families of key workers. I have a constituent who is a key worker and has been sent home because her son has also been sent home from school to isolate. She cannot go back to work until her son has a negative test, but he does not qualify for free testing. In other words, she must pay to get her son tested before she can go back to a key occupation. That cannot be the right way to treat our key workers. I urge the Minister to look as quickly as possible at how we deal with these key members of our society.

May I ask the Minister to look again, through the Treasury, at those who were remunerated through dividends? Many of those people are hard-working and decent, not tax dodgers. They were able to get by for a short time, but as the lockdown goes on, it is becoming impossible for them and they are facing absolute undue hardship.

My main comments relate to our great maxim in medicine—do no harm. That means that the patient must not be worse off from the cure than they were from the original disease. This is a dilemma facing all Governments. How do we protect public health while ensuring the economic viability by which the funding for public services is generated? So far, the public remain very supportive of the Government's position, but that cannot be guaranteed. Recent controversies over the use of data have made it more difficult for the Government simply to say that they are following the science. Sadly, there is growing resistance to the concept of lockdowns, which is inevitable as economic concerns rise to the fore. It is utterly irrational to say that one is against all lockdowns, because that needs to be a decision taken on the basis of the evidence at the time. However, we need to understand the anxieties and the frustrations if the Government want to keep their options open and retain credibility with the public.

So how can Parliament play its part in that process? Covid-19 is not just a health issue; it is also an economic issue, affecting welfare and employment and our personal and social wellbeing. And of course there is no such thing, actually, as “the science”; rather, there is a range of scientific views, and we need to understand what that range is and the weight given to the respective parts of it if we are to have faith in the outcome of the judgments that have been made.

Our current Select Committees are very good at looking at departmental functions and policy, but they are very vertical and do not look across the whole of Government. In 2012, after the banking scandal, David Cameron set up the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards; it was a full parliamentary Committee of inquiry involving both Houses. I believe we need the same now: senior but temporary, cross-party and with both Houses. Of course, the reaction from the Front Bench is likely to be “no more scrutiny”—I have been there and done that; I have been on the Front Bench and know what all those arguments are—but I think it would be a mistake and something the Government would come to regret, because such a Commission would help show that across the whole of Government, advice and data had been properly scrutinised. It is an opportunity to reinforce public confidence as we face the covid pandemic into 2021.

Finally, there is another reason why we should have such a set-up. This will not be the last pandemic we face. In the era of globalisation, when in normal times, for example, we have 700,000 people in the air at any one time, we will face further pandemics, and although this has been a tragedy for every single case, it has not been a particularly lethal pandemic by historical standards. We must set up the structures that we will need to deal with future pandemics, and we need internationally to work out the protocols we will put in place when we have the emergence of new viruses and the metrics we will use to measure that, because we cannot have the disorganised and shambolic international response that we have had to this particular pandemic. Meanwhile, at home we

need transparency, with all the evidence scrutinised, if we are to maintain public confidence and see off the political opportunists and the conspiracy theorists, and, with that transparency, we need that scrutiny in this House and we need it urgently.

5.36 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Despite its dreadful impact, the coronavirus pandemic has brought out the very best in people, from Captain Sir Tom Moore's inspiring fundraising efforts to volunteers in communities across my Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituency who have mobilised to ensure that the vulnerable among them receive food and medicine as they shield from this deadly virus. I would like to pay tribute to some of them today: Fife Voluntary Action, Benarty emergency response team and the many “Scotland Loves Local” high street heroes award winners, to name but a few. But of course I also add my thanks to all the key workers who kept us all going throughout lockdown.

The pandemic has also, however, laid bare the opportunism of some: a profiteering cronyism that runs through the heart of this Westminster Government—what Canadian author and social activist Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism”. In her award-winning book “The Shock Doctrine”, Klein presents a convincing narrative of a political strategy that exploits large-scale crises, such as this pandemic, to push through neo-liberal policy that systematically deepens inequality while simultaneously enriching the already wealthy with connections to those in power.

In the crisis we face today, ordinary people are focused on the daily challenge of survival, yet in parallel we have repeatedly witnessed new private companies springing up to profit directly, greatly assisted in those efforts by a political class prepared to make strenuous efforts to line the pockets of many with close links to the party of government. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) incisively said of this phenomenon, people across these islands are in the grip of a cronyvirus at the heart of this Government that may be every bit as deadly as the coronavirus.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the private sector has played a role in helping to tackle the virus, and specifically that Pfizer, as a private company, has only got the money to invest because of its profit and share nature?

Neale Hanvey: I do not dispute the role of private companies in meeting the challenge of the coronavirus. I will go on to discuss the transparency and the appropriateness of the way in which contracts have been awarded by this Government during the pandemic.

We have only to look at the PPE fiasco to see how this has been brazenly put into action, with large contracts awarded to small firms with little to no experience in the relevant field but with numerous links to the Conservative party. How on earth did the Government find them? In what amounts to a covid bonanza for these tiny companies, Government contracts worth more than £10 billion have been awarded in this way since March. Under cover of the pandemic, the standard rules have been put aside, enabling contracts to be issued in extreme urgency

[Neale Hanvey]

with little to no oversight; I refer here to the comments made by the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) about scrutiny.

With the emergence of promising vaccine candidates, we collectively hope that there is light at the end of the tunnel. However, the darkness of our journey through this pandemic must not be allowed to obscure our important public duty to act in good faith and with financial probity. We simply cannot emerge from this experience with the dismissive “at any cost” excuse deployed from the top of this Government down. We must ensure that the burden is shared equally.

Enormous amounts of public money have been dished out in the absence of any tendering process, value for money assessment or assessment of whether any of these companies have relevant experience. We have all heard stories of UK businesses with expertise whose offers of help went unanswered by this Government. Why? On PPE, £108 million went to a tiny pest control company with net assets of £18,000. Another £108 million went to a modestly sized confectioner in Northern Ireland, while a third contract worth £252 million was awarded to an opaque private fund owned through a tax haven. The more that Members and external interested parties scratch the surface of this Government’s contract profligacy, the more serious are the questions that arise.

It is not just PPE. Under the fast-track rules, private firms have been handed a total of 843 direct contracts, including those that administer covid-19 tests and provide food parcels and medical supplies. Then, of course, there is the disastrous £12 billion test and trace failure, led by Conservative peer Baroness Harding. In yesterday’s joint Select Committee hearing, a possible reason for that was revealed. In July, the CMO claimed in a Select Committee that the ability to ramp up testing was “significantly strained”. Yesterday, Professor Sir Chris Ham gave evidence that increasing capacity over the crucial summer months was too slow, yet Baroness Harding claimed that testing capacity was increasing throughout the summer. What is the truth of the matter? Unfortunately, that was not the only incongruity, as Baroness Harding did not show a clear command of her brief, failing to answer or, in some cases, understand what was being asked.

The global pandemic is an absolute disaster for so many, with an unimaginable loss of life, yet the brightest and best of humanity have been working tirelessly on effective treatments and a vaccine. Rightly or wrongly, the appointment of Kate Bingham has proved controversial. There are no doubt questions to be asked about the absence of any clear recruitment process, but when she appeared before the Health and Social Care Committee recently, she was impressive. She was clearly on top of and in command of her brief.

However, that does not vacate the responsibility of this Government and any appointees to act ethically and in good faith and, most important, to account transparently for their actions. There are concerns about Kate Bingham’s astronomical public relations bill and claims that she shared sensitive information with investors. Further concerns emerged in *The Guardian* yesterday—in simple terms, how can a job be considered unpaid when the postholder has a position of influence or control in

the process of awarding a £49 million investment to a company in which they remain a managing partner and from which they will surely benefit? Whatever the Prime Minister’s bluster, these matters must be fully scrutinised.

Sad as the pandemic is, what saddens the most is that these conditions are seen by some as an opportunity for Governments and corporate interests to implement political agendas that would otherwise be met with great resistance and opposition. The Government are on notice that, despite the disorientation of the public health crisis we are living through, these matters are being pursued.

This chain of events is not unique to the current crisis; it is a blueprint that neo-liberal politicians and Governments have been following for decades. Many thought that the meltdown of the global financial system in 2008 would prompt a comprehensive rethink of the principles underlying global capitalism, but in reality it was exploited to implement austerity and defund public services and social welfare provision on a grand scale. Covid illustrated that no more keenly than in respect of social care.

The 2018 report on social care from the other place pointed to a gap in service for 1.4 million people. This year, the Independent Care Group suggested that 1.5 million people are already living without the care that they need. The number keeps growing. One and a half million vulnerable and elderly people throughout England—husbands, wives, parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters; each and every one deserves much better from their Government. The Government are presiding over a social care system that is close to collapse.

Sir Simon Stevens, chief executive of the national health service, told the BBC that the covid-19 crisis had shone “a very harsh spotlight” on the “resilience” of the care system. The truth is that it comes down to priorities and political choices. To reform social care to pre-austerity levels will now cost more than £14 billion. That is a large sum, but it is £9 billion less than the bank bail-outs of 2007-08, which cost the public purse £23 billion overall. The annual operating costs of Trident nuclear weapons come in at £2 billion—far short of the £14 billion we need to repair the economic vandalism of austerity but, according to the costs worked out by Skills for Care, enough to recruit and train almost 550,000 new social careworkers every single year.

According to Age UK, 167,000 older people and their families throughout England now have to fund their own care because of the means test for free or subsidised support. Older people who are obliged to buy their own care have spent more than £7 billion in the 12 months since the Prime Minister took office and promised to fix social care. Every single day in England, 14 people exhaust their assets paying for care.

The reality is that the social care system that entered the pandemic was underfunded, understaffed, undervalued and at risk of collapse. Any response to covid-19, however fast or comprehensive, would have needed to contend with this legacy of political neglect. Government policies to support social care have faced major and widespread problems, not least the PPE crisis, which has led to a lack of protection for some people using and providing adult social care. Local authorities report that additional Government funding has been insufficient to cover the additional costs.

As has become all too clear throughout the recent crisis in England, protecting social care has been given far too low a priority. When the Minister for Care appeared before the Health and Social Care Committee last month, despite admitting that

“the social care system needs fixing”

and making a commitment to do so, she was unwilling to give any date for when the disinvestment of austerity would be rectified. If not now, when?

The UK Government do not even need to look far for inspiration: although challenges remain, they could learn much from Scotland’s approach. The story north and south of the border is very different, as is evident in our approaches to social care post covid. The Scottish Government have established an independent review to look at the creation of a national care service for all. As the Nuffield Trust points out, Scotland’s reforms are

“the most advanced of the countries...having set out an ambitious and comprehensive vision for a social care service.”

Because free personal care has been in place in Scotland since 2002, two thirds of those receiving social care support in Scotland do so in their own homes.

A further lesson from Scotland is the introduction of Frank’s law in April 2019. Under this legislation, free personal care was extended to all adults. Despite all these significant advances being made in Scotland, the system continues to struggle because we are part of the UK. Let us take funding, for example. The simple truth is that, without independence, we are limited in our funding options. Hoping for Barnett consequentials any time soon seems unlikely, given the UK Government’s timidity towards social care reform in England. Then there is Brexit. While the Government celebrate the end of freedom of movement, the loss of its opportunities is lamented in Scotland. The Migration Advisory Committee is entirely right that this poses a stark risk for social care, given that the services are dependent on EU nationals. UK policy delivers to Scotland a triple threat: a lack of reform to tackle the many pre-existing issues; the Government’s irrational and ideological approach to the EU; and an immigration policy that refuses to acknowledge, never mind accommodate, the specific needs of Scotland.

I had a fleeting hope in March that covid would raise this Government’s eyes to injustice and the value of those in healthcare. I felt sure that honouring all the heroes in our NHS and care sector would naturally follow, but no. With the weekly clapping now a distant memory, many do not feel valued or do not feel that their efforts are properly recognised. Campaigners are calling on Ministers to boost nurses’ pay without delay. The Scottish Government are currently delivering the highest pay award in the UK for NHS Agenda for Change staff of at least 9% over the three years from 2019. They also gave an immediate 3.3% pay rise to social care workers and have just announced £50 million for the social care staff support fund for those who contract covid-19.

This Government sprang into action to approve countless contracts for their wealthy friends at the start of the pandemic, but that sense of urgency is sadly lacking when it comes to taking action on nurses’ pay or addressing the poverty of carers. The Prime Minister demonstrated yet again today that his ears are made of cloth. He ignores repeated calls for the £20 uplift to universal

credit to be made permanent and extended to legacy benefits, which is backed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children, and he defended his Government’s refusal to feed children in poverty during the summer holidays, yet brags about Marcus Rashford’s campaign this winter. It was support grudgingly given through shame.

We are seeing a return to the lack of compassion of the 1980s, but what we are witnessing now casts minds back further still, not just to the Thatcher years but to Dickensian Britain where great wealth and extreme poverty existed cheek by jowl, conjuring images of barefoot children with empty bowls and a population without access to medical or social care. This is the stark reality of Tory Britain: poverty, a pay-to-access suboptimal social care system, an assault on employment and working conditions, and the exclusion of the self-employed. Coronavirus must not be allowed to cover for the cronyvirus at the heart of this Government. Some say that Scotland gets too generous a settlement, but that is a false narrative. These policies exist in Scotland because—

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This debate is about covid-19, the pandemic in our constituencies right now, but the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) is taking us back to the 1980s. Is that as it should be?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am not responsible for the hon. Gentleman’s speech, but I know that he will be conscious of the number of people who wish to contribute to this debate. I know him to be a fair man and we are coming now to exactly the same timings of the other Front-Bench contributions, so if he could come to a conclusion, that would be really useful.

Neale Hanvey: It may not be the perception of the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) that this is important to covid, but it is in Scotland, and I am speaking to the people in Scotland.

The policies that exist to support us exist in Scotland because people vote for parties that campaign for these political choices. Prior to the 2014 referendum, Business for Scotland analysis revealed that, in each of the 30 previous years, Scotland generated more tax revenue per head for the UK Treasury than the rest of the UK. The subsidy myth was well and truly busted. The Prime Minister or Conservative Members talk of the generous handout from this Government, but it is not a handout; it is our money. It is our money that they are giving back to us. Scotland’s economy, when benchmarked against similar-sized independent nations that, quite frankly, would love to have Scotland’s economic advantages and natural resources, illustrates vividly the dreadful impact of Westminster’s continued economic mismanagement.

In closing—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hurrah!”] Conservative Members might not like it. Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris recently referred to the following quote:

“Democracy is not a state. It is an act”.

To those aspiring for statehood in Scotland, I say this: it is time for democracy and it is time to act like a state.

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

5.55 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We have made the case against the regulations in this House and we have lost all the votes, and that is democracy. However, liberal western democracy is more than rule by the majority. It certainly includes freedom of association, freedom of expression and freedom to worship. One of the most worrying aspects of our response to the coronavirus has been the way people have simply shrugged as these freedoms have been dispensed with. The Government have armed themselves with all the coercive powers of the state to tell us whom we may meet, when we may meet them, where we may meet them and what we must wear. Freedom of protest has been dispensed with, as has freedom of worship.

Is it not interesting, the way that subsidiaries of the totalitarian state, in their eagerness, seek to exceed even what has been proscribed and prescribed? I have received representations from clinicians who have been threatened that their jobs will be taken from them because they have publicly expressed their doubts about the wisdom of the policy or, indeed, their doubts about the misuse or the concealment of data. We had the extraordinary scene of a nurse being charged with assault for seeking to liberate her mother from a care home. Could this have happened in our country? Then we saw those students seeking to effect a great escape from the Stalag Luft III that their university had imposed on them.

As these enormities occurred, instead of the expected rising chorus of protest, on the contrary we are told by the pollsters that actually the British people thirst for even greater restraints on their liberty. I am appalled—absolutely appalled. These liberties, as we heard in the debate earlier this afternoon, were bought at an extraordinarily high price. Now, as we move into the vaccinated sunny uplands of release and freedom, there is a danger that the state has learned a powerful lesson over the last few months—namely, that the British people do not worry too much about their liberties and that they can be dispensed with conveniently when need arises. I hope that this House will wake up to that danger and seek a remedy.

5.58 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): In April, the Government asked businesses across our country to step up to help in the pandemic. I want to tell a story of two businesses that tried to help in the pandemic. It is a contrast between two PPE companies: Florence Roby, owned by constituents of mine in Formby, and PPE Medro, which was founded on 12 May this year. Seven weeks later, this company was given a contract for £122 million to provide medical robes. The contract was not advertised anywhere else, and presumably it was delivered, but we have no way of knowing because we have not had the outcomes yet.

How was Florence Roby doing by 12 May, having first approached the Government in March, before the big call for help came? It has been going for more than 50 years, and it is a specialist in the manufacture of uniforms. Working with local NHS providers, it designed medical robes that could be reused up to 100 times. It took two months for Florence Roby to get an answer, which took it past the 12 May date. Meanwhile, it developed the product and applied for the CE marks. In June, it was told that its product was not required. The

Government's email said that they had all the PPE they could possibly ever need. Florence Roby and dozens of other companies across the country were told the same thing: their services were no longer required.

Florence Roby had put weeks of effort and thousands of pounds of investment into developing a product, which, remember, was 100 times reusable; meanwhile, we were getting planeloads of plastic medical robes from Turkey that could not be used because the quality was not good enough. That is the reality of what my constituents faced. They still have not had a contract or a satisfactory answer from the Government. They were just given the runaround.

PPE Medpro is not the only company to have profited, having been started from scratch or having had very little footprint and no previous experience. We saw that, as the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) mentioned, with PestFix and its £108 million contract. PPE Medpro had one advantage: it was assisted by its relationship with a Conservative Member of the House of Lords. Randox, similarly connected to Members of the ruling party, got a £347 million contract for covid tests that could not be used because of safety concerns. Ayanda Capital, which supplied unusable facemasks, is based in Mauritius, and we heard at Prime Minister's questions from the Leader of the Opposition about £130 million for external PR. All the while, a £7,000 day rate is being paid to consultants more widely. Florence Roby employs local people and a contract would have added jobs in its factory; instead, it had to lay people off, while PPE Medpro shipped from overseas. That is the contrast.

Let us remember that we were told all the way through that there are unique circumstances about procurement during a crisis, and I do not deny that. On 11 April, there was a call to arms from the Health Secretary to any UK textile company that could assist. On 15 April, the Government's website was calling for PPE manufacturers and home-grown industries. On 4 May, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster spoke of support for

"companies capable of contributing supplies."—[*Official Report*, 4 May 2020; Vol. 675, c. 411.]

All those requests were made and answered by Florence Roby and a list of other companies, including EcoLogix in my constituency, Imperial Polythene Products in Slough, and Staeger Clear Packaging, which makes aprons and other PPE, but they were turned down despite offering to help. It was a chance for British companies to contribute to the crisis, and it was a chance for taxpayers' money to support businesses through the pandemic to help with jobs and the economy, but they were turned down. That is why the National Audit Office investigation and report are so important.

6.3 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Amid all the damage caused by the coronavirus pandemic to public health, to the economy and to social wellbeing, arguably the biggest impact has been on residents of care homes and their families. Care home residents, among the most vulnerable members of our community, have been disproportionately impacted by covid-19. According to the Office for National Statistics, up to 30 October about 28% of covid-related deaths recorded in England

and Wales were in care homes. It is therefore fully understandable that care home providers should be cautious about visits to their homes by family members. However, it should also be remembered that many care home residents are living with dementia. Being deprived of visits causes disorientation and distress to them and, equally, to their families.

My constituent Mrs Kathy Barham of Ruthin has described to me the impact that visiting restrictions are having on her family. Her mother, Mrs Mavis Addison, lives in a care home in Wallasey. She is a widow and has lived all her life in Wallasey. Until 2016, she lived independently, but she was then diagnosed with dementia and moved into a residential care home. That did not mean that she stopped enjoying life. Every weekend, Mrs Barham would travel from Ruthin to visit her, take her out for afternoon tea and meet friends and family. Mrs Addison's life was good. She was happy, and she was living well with dementia.

Visits from family members are extremely important to those living with dementia. In fact, the Government's own guidance acknowledges that. However, since the lockdown was imposed some eight months ago, Mrs Addison has not seen her daughter or any other member of her family. Distressingly, Mrs Barham now says that her mother is simply giving up because of the enforced lack of contact with her closest relatives, and that is surely the case for many thousands of other people who are living with dementia around our country. It is a sad, distressing and, I suggest, inhumane state of affairs.

The campaign group Rights for Residents, of which Mrs Barham is a member, is calling for an end to the current restrictions on visits to care home residents. Hospitals are managing to provide safe visits, and the Government could, frankly, do more to facilitate equally safe visits to care homes. But the sad truth is that, frequently, the families of care home residents are allowed to visit their loved ones only if they have become so ill that they are receiving end of life care. Indeed, after the easing of restrictions in early summer, care home residents became the only group in our society who continued to endure prolonged enforced separation from their families.

Rights for Residents is calling on the Government to pursue a more humane and nuanced approach to the treatment of care home residents. It asks the Government to produce guidelines that encourage care providers to find safe ways to visit, rather than ones that in many cases are interpreted so as to impose blanket bans on contact with families. It suggests that key worker status should be granted to relatives, as was suggested by the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), with access to the same testing regime as care home staff to facilitate the resumption of regular indoor visits. It also asks the Government to consider ways of developing an indemnity regime for care providers against legal action should the virus be brought into a care home—it is frequently the fear of litigation that inhibits visits to elderly people in care homes—and to develop updated comprehensive guidance that focuses on protecting vulnerable people against the appalling prospect of simply dying of loneliness.

Covid-19 is a dreadful disease, and it has inflicted illness and death on large numbers of our fellow citizens. It has, however, also brought mental anguish and distress to thousands of the most vulnerable and their families. With winter fast approaching, it is time for the Government

to put in place a new visiting regime that gives proper consideration to the needs of care home residents and their families, and they could do worse than listen to the recommendations of Rights for Residents.

6.8 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I want to start with a quote from the incomparable C. S. Lewis, who said:

“The duty of planning tomorrow's work is today's duty”.

That is what I want to talk about—our duty to get several steps ahead of this virus so that we are on the front foot in the future. There is no doubt that this pandemic has tested every aspect of government. All around the world, leaders have had to react fast to the extreme challenges that have faced them.

I know how annoying it is when former Cabinet Ministers poke at Front-Bench colleagues, so I make my remarks today with full appreciation of how hard this is; it is much easier to give advice than to actually make it happen. I simply want to ask my hon. Friend the Minister to give the House an update on whether the Government are now fighting fit, whether we are now outpacing the virus, and whether we can now get several steps ahead and think about the future beyond the pandemic.

First, with the fantastic news of the possibility of a vaccine, can my hon. Friend tell us how the Government have combined the efforts of public and private sectors to make sure that every aspect of the vaccine programme is scalable from day one across the UK? Secondly, the evidence of the testing programme in Liverpool shows yet again how fantastic our armed forces are at dealing with complex logistics, so can my hon. Friend confirm that their expertise will be used in every part of the country? Thirdly, can my hon. Friend confirm that all preparations are in place to distribute the first wave of vaccines, and to determine precisely who will receive them and in what order of priority?

All those steps are vital in giving us an advantage on the path to a post-covid future. Only then can we really set our sights on our ambition for economic success as an independent, sovereign United Kingdom. With that in mind, first, can my hon. Friend provide reassurance that the Government are looking ahead at the potential for the UK to lead the world in tackling global climate change? That is not only the right thing to do but, for this generation, it provides massive potential for new jobs and growth, and will help us to build our global free-trade relationships as we seek to lead the world in decarbonisation.

Secondly, can my hon. Friend tell me how the Government are using the experience of lockdown to better understand how embracing flexible work as standard in all employment could enable the workforce of the future to enjoy a far better work-life balance and improve the quality of life for many people? Thirdly, can she confirm that the Government are looking at what more can be done for small and medium-sized enterprises, which are the lifeblood of our economy and the future job builders? Many business owners have seen their livelihoods destroyed by this unforgiving pandemic, and they will struggle to get back on their feet. We need a strategy to give entrepreneurs help and support, as well as confidence, to restart.

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

The pandemic has forced us to focus anew on those in society who need our help, including people who have suffered greatly. First, how do we ensure that never again will schoolchildren have to face teacher-assessed grades, with all the potential professional implications that that has for their lives? How will we make sure that younger children catch up so that we do not have a cohort who always struggle with literacy and numeracy? Secondly, how do the Government plan to help school leavers and university students who feel hopeless about their future job prospects? The Chancellor's kickstart scheme is a great short-term fix, but it does not offer training or a long-term future path that many young people crave. Thirdly, what more can Government do for the most vulnerable in our society who have suffered serious harm and loneliness this year, including those who suffer from conditions such as Alzheimer's or those with new babies who have been left isolated, with potential long-term harm for their families?

I believe that we have a bright future post the pandemic, but we must use the time that we have now to get ahead with our planning for the future. I began with a quote from C. S. Lewis, and I will close with another one:

"There are far, far better things ahead than any we leave behind."

Let us make that true.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. After Nadia Whittome, who may speak for five minutes, we move to a time limit of up to four minutes.

6.13 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I would like to begin by thanking the many frontline workers in my constituency in Nottingham—my friends, my neighbours and my constituents—for the hard work that they are doing to get us through this virus.

Like everyone here today, I was excited and hopeful to hear the news of Pfizer's promising new vaccine. After months of painful sacrifices, there may finally be a way out of this crisis. It is early days, and we have to be cautious in our optimism, but we must do all that we can in the House to make sure that once a vaccine gets the go-ahead, we make its roll-out a success, and keep people safe in the meantime. That is why I am concerned about the rise of conspiracy theories. People across the country have had leaflets dropped through their doors warning against wearing masks. They have seen stickers saying that covid was a plot by a shadowy elite, or come across websites making false and disproven claims about vaccinations. Anti-lockdown protests have also been happening across the country, often featuring placards with known antisemitic tropes, or promoting the far-right conspiracy theory QAnon.

When I hear from people who become interested in these ideas, I get it. I do get it. I understand why people are scared and frustrated, and why they are looking for answers. It is hard being separated from your loved ones for months on end, worrying about how you are going to pay the rent and make ends meet and, in the meantime, watching the Government make a complete mess of the handling of the crisis. It is painful to know that, while we have had to sacrifice our friendships, passions and mental health, those in power have failed us over and

again: from ignoring their own scientific advice, which made this lockdown longer and harder, to failing to protect jobs and livelihoods, failing to plan and leaving our frontline workers without PPE, and reportedly spending £12 billion on a privatised test and trace system that proved to be a shambles. It is hard to blame people for becoming suspicious when they see the Government awarding multi-million pound contracts to their friends and donors, often without even a competitive tendering process, or when they see the Prime Minister's closest adviser flout lockdown rules without any consequences.

When we spend time home alone isolated, it is easy to fall down dangerous rabbit holes and to start believing that it is all a lie, that the virus is a conspiracy or that lockdowns are unnecessary and merely a tool to control people. But we know that that is not the answer. I think all of us, in our heart of hearts, know that, even the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), who has vacated his seat. It is our responsibility, as Members of this House, every single one of us, to fight this pandemic of misinformation, which is spreading like a virus and is sabotaging people's efforts to save lives.

I am also concerned that some people are exploiting people's pain to spread their hateful agendas, like the British National party, which, for the first time in my living memory, has been sending letters to small businesses in my constituency, or those ready to sacrifice human lives in order to stay relevant and boost their careers. I am referring here of course to, among many others, Nigel Farage, who in March was criticising the Government's herd immunity approach and is now rebranding himself as the leader of the anti-lockdown movement.

My constituents have made it clear to me that they are not having any of it and that our city is not having any of it. I hope that everyone in this House can join me in condemning the cynical and ridiculous way that people, and the far right in particular, are exploiting people's suffering to spread lies.

6.18 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I was glad to hear the Minister, in his opening remarks, refer to the need to focus on data because I am going to use my limited time today to argue for more data analysis specifically on the effectiveness of lockdown restrictions, and to support the move towards an approach that Professor Sir John Bell calls enablement, which essentially means using testing to allow us to continue as normal a life as possible.

As with many across the House, I had hoped that we could continue the management of coronavirus through a system of regional alert levels. Sadly, it became clear that that was not the case. Although it controlled the virus, the virus was spreading faster than we could accommodate in the NHS. The key question we now need to ask ourselves is, why was that the case? Why did the regional approach not slow the spread of the virus fast enough? We need to establish why, so we can fix it and resume the regional system with renewed confidence that it will contain the virus without the need for further national lockdown.

One aspect that needs more analysis in particular, is compliance. It is possible, indeed probable, that a lack of compliance played a role in the regional tier approach

insufficiently controlling the virus, but we do not have the data at the moment to fully establish that. Baroness Harding, the head of NHS' Test and Trace, appeared before a joint evidence session of the Health and Social Care and Science and Technology Committees yesterday. She gave preliminary data showing that 54% of people quarantine when asked, but also cautioned that the remaining 46% will include many people who have gone outside very briefly to get some fresh air or maybe to get some food that was completely necessary. It is clear that we need firmer data on this because, as we focus on driving up the number of contacts reached, it will ultimately not be effective if those people are not staying at home when they are asked to do so. We need a clear-eyed understanding of whether people are complying and a strategy for addressing it—whether we need to change the monetary incentives or the information we are giving people, or simply change the rules.

Professor Sir John Bell raised the point that we need buy-in for people to want to have a test and quarantine. He believes that many people are being put off having a test for fear of condemning their contacts to two weeks of quarantine without hope or reprieve. He suggested a system whereby the contacts of those infected are tested and released from quarantine if they test negative, and then rechecked every few days. I am pleased that the Department has confirmed that it is pursuing that approach and trialling it in limited areas, and I hope it is something we can go forward with, because the data-led approach that accepts a level of risk in order to drive up compliance, with the aim of allowing people to return to normal as far as possible, is something that we should applaud.

I wholeheartedly echo the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) about testing in care homes and making sure that we get the relatives and friends of people in care homes tested so that they can visit, because it has been a devastating time for so many.

On the topic of evidence, please can we have the evidence base for not exempting golf, tennis and children's sports from lockdown rules? If people can take a walk outside, they might as well be able to do it with some golf clubs.

Back on the theme of data, may we have a data-driven decision on whether we still need the curfew if we go back into a regional approach? While I completely understand why we introduced it, it had a devastating effect on hospitality across the country. If it works, we can understand why it is imposed, but if it does not work, we will all be better off without it.

6.22 pm

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I want to start in the only way possible, which is by thanking all those voluntary groups and individuals in my constituency for their immense work over the course of many months this year. Those thanks of course extend to key workers and, indeed, to all NHS staff in Aberdeen. I want to pay particular thanks to those staff in Woodend Hospital in Aberdeen, who just eight weeks ago delivered me a new hip, despite all the restrictions that are in place. I am incredibly thankful to them for their diligence, good humour and skill. Hopefully in the weeks to come I will be able to get rid of my crutch and run around here a bit more freely.

I want to turn to the wider situation in Aberdeen at this time, because I believe the House needs to be firmly aware of quite how drastically difficult the situation is. We are all facing challenging circumstances, but Aberdeen is unique in many respects, given the fact that not only have we had the pandemic, but we have had the perfect storm caused by the complete collapse in the oil price. We have seen from data in recent weeks that in the six months following March, the number of universal credit claimants in the city has more than doubled from just under 8,000 to almost 17,000. Oil & Gas UK has indicated that nearly 35,000 jobs may be on the line in that industry. In recent weeks, it has emerged into the public domain that there has been a 75% reduction in job vacancies in the city that I represent. Those figures are terrifying.

We are a robust city—we are used to difficult times given the fluctuation in the oil price—but I am concerned about what the future holds. Ultimately the levers of power that can elicit positive change rest in this place, and because they rest in this place, it is incumbent on this UK Government to step up to the plate and deliver for my constituency.

In terms of universal credit, it is straightforward. The first thing that could be done is to extend the £20 universal credit uplift beyond the spring and to backdate it to legacy benefits. The second thing that must be delivered is an oil and gas sector deal, not just to protect industry now but to protect jobs in the future as we move towards a renewable transition—a just transition that protects all our futures and livelihoods within the city that I represent. The third, and perhaps the most important thing that the Government could do at this moment, is to provide the Scottish Parliament with the borrowing powers it has repeatedly asked for. It has repeatedly asked the UK Government for borrowing powers to provide the additional support that businesses and workers in Scotland need. That has fallen on deaf ears up to now, and that is a damned disgrace.

I will conclude, as I am conscious of time. We have been shown contempt in Scotland in relation to the lack of borrowing powers and by the fact that we still have absolutely no idea what the totality of the Scottish budget will be next year, and that contempt will be seen at the polls. After 12 consecutive polls showing support for Scottish independence well in excess of 50%, this Government should be on watch, because the people of Scotland will decide a different path. We will take our future into our own hands.

6.26 pm

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): First, I thank my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), who is not in his place at this moment, for providing the House with what I can only describe as an energising tonic—perhaps an antidote—after what I can only describe as the soporific dirge that immediately preceded him.

The news that the first effective coronavirus vaccine could prevent 90% of people from catching covid-19 is incredibly reassuring. That success may well indicate the first steps towards returning to normal life and an end to the damage caused by lockdowns, a renewed focus on economic recovery and people regaining the freedoms and liberties curtailed during this crisis. Crucially, the efforts of BioNTech and Pfizer demonstrate the power of the private sector and of capitalism to benefit everyone.

[*Imran Ahmad Khan*]

In March this year, Pfizer and BioNTech announced details of their collaboration to develop a covid-19 vaccine, in which there has been limited state involvement. Pfizer accepted advance purchases from a number of Governments, but did not accept conditional research and development funds, including funds from Operation Warp Speed in the United States. The millions spent and the resources diverted towards an uncertain innovation by these two firms have been at their own risk, with no guarantee of success.

Without the bureaucracy that state-run projects are burdened with, Pfizer and BioNTech have been able to focus solely on the scientific challenge that confronted them, whether that be research and development, the logistics of manufacturing or the operations of distribution. Dr Albert Bourla, the CEO of Pfizer, rightly stated that he

“wanted to liberate our scientists from any bureaucracy.”

This extraordinary effort demonstrates that profit incentives and altruism are not diametrically opposed or in any way contradictory. The efforts of Pfizer and BioNTech will save countless lives and help forge a path of recovery, while both firms stand to make a profit. Her Majesty’s Government made the right decision to pre-purchase 10% of Pfizer’s global supply. Once again, it shows the vote of confidence we should all give to the private sector in tackling great challenges. When we emerge from this crisis—and we shall—we should unleash the full power of our private sector and unburden it from excessive regulations and high taxes. Only through doing so can we ensure a sustainable recovery.

Finally, I want to thank the constituents of Wakefield and the wider Wakefield district, who in the first lockdown adhered to the rules, did exactly what they said, saved lives and protected the NHS. When we came out of that lockdown they, with a gusto only known by Yorkshiremen, took the Chancellor’s offer of a bargain, with more than 130,000 people utilising eat out to help out. We had the biggest bounce back of anyone in the region, with a 27% increase in footfall in Wakefield. When we were put on the warning list for covid, people adhered to the rules, our rate came down and we were no longer on it; we had a lower covid rate than almost anyone else. Again, we have been put into these particular strictures, but there is light at the end of the tunnel and I have every confidence that yet again the people of Wakefield will do the right thing, and protect the NHS and each other.

6.30 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The Minister may be aware that Hull has the highest rate of covid infections in the country; we have 161 patients in Hull Royal Infirmary, 16 of whom are in intensive care, and 265 have died since the pandemic began. The situation in Hull and the East Riding is a public health emergency, so where are these Nightingale hospitals to help? I have been told that they have been mothballed and will not be reopened. Our rate is double that of the average in England, and I am incredibly worried about the situation in schools. Despite the headlines saying that they remain open, year groups are being sent home, not to self-isolate, but because teachers are not available to teach in them. Where is the testing for staff, to keep these schools open? Where is this

additional support? Why has Hull not had the support from the armed forces that Liverpool had when its rates became so high? We have been promised 10,000 tests, but that will not be enough. This is not a league table I want my city to top; we need that additional help from the Government if we are going to move down it.

Losing someone hurts. On Monday, I lost my nan to covid-19. She did not die in Hull; she died somewhere else. I hope that if my mum is watching, she knows that I am sending her all my love from this place and that as soon as possible I will be round there to give her a hug and we can remember all the wonderful things my nan did. It was only last year that I stood up in this Chamber and told everyone what a remarkable woman she was. I urge people to take this situation seriously.

The northern powerhouse study shows that because we started from an uneven point in the north, covid has had a disproportional impact on the cities we represent. The report today says that we have had an extra 12.4 deaths per 100,000 in the northern powerhouse that in the rest of England put together, and an extra 57.7 deaths per 100,000 due to all causes during this pandemic. Things are not equal; this pandemic has not impacted all of us equally, and it has an economic cost. To all those who make the false divide between health and the economy, I say: think again. All those additional people deaths in the areas in the northern powerhouse have had an economic impact—it is not just the heartbreak of people who have lost loved ones. Some £6.86 billion has been lost in economic growth. There is no divide between health and economy; we must sort out the problem with health and then deal with the problem with the economy. They are not mutually exclusive.

Compliance is falling in my area, and there is mistrust of the Government. We need transparency, honesty and openness. We need a Government who admit it when they get things wrong. We need to explain why the rules are different for golf and for walking, for private worship and for visiting the supermarket, because people will then understand. The Government’s in information, clarity and transparency gap is being filled with misinformation, lies and dangerous fake news on social media telling people that this is not real. Well, it is real when you lose people. Some 50,000 lives have already been lost in this pandemic. That is 50,000 families who have been impacted. I do not want a Government who are focused on PR, bluster and incoherent metaphors. What I want is a Government who just give people honest and straightforward advice, so that together we can try to deal with this virus.

6.34 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): May I offer my heartfelt condolences to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy)? There is nothing worse than losing a member of your family that you love, and the reason I am here today is to speak on behalf of a mother in my constituency who also lost someone very dear to her—her 21-year-old son, Jamie. Jamie represents a cohort that often falls through the cracks in care, not just during a pandemic but in everyday existence. It is the cohort of working-age disabled adults in long-term residential care.

Jamie’s mother battled for him from the day of his birth to ensure that he had the care and provision that he needed to succeed. She was a teacher, and she is a

local community champion. During lockdown, she was denied access to her son. She was unable to visit him and watched in horror as his health and situation deteriorated day by day. He became catatonic, refused to eat, and developed open wounds and bed sores. It was not until lockdown ended that she was able to have access to her son, her only son, but by that point it was too late. Jamie had passed away the week before.

I had been unaware of the situation that Jamie was in, and I am speaking today to raise awareness so that other family members may have access and special visitation rights to a child who is in adult social care and who is struggling during the pandemic. I hope that my speaking about Jamie will help them to get that access and that we will remember to have humanity and compassion for those who are vulnerable and suffering during the pandemic. As a mother myself, I cannot imagine not being able to see my child. I know that many Members in this House have older children, and perhaps they will testify that parenting does not stop at 18 or at 21. You are a parent to your child forever, and to be unable to help and advocate for a child with complex disabilities who cannot speak for themselves is a tragedy. I am here to speak on Jamie's behalf so that others will have a voice.

I am so grateful for the Government's announcement that a vaccine is coming and that a mass roll-out of testing is being organised. That will go a long way to help the most vulnerable, but I want this very small cohort to be remembered. I want safeguarding measures to be put in place. As we go into the winter months, we must remember that this patient cohort needs additional support, care and patient advocacy, and that the parents need visitation rights so that they can speak on behalf of those who have no voice.

I would like to pay special tribute to the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), for her work behind the scenes on this issue. She has spent a great deal of time helping and assisting, and she does not get the credit she deserves for trying to advocate for this patient cohort and raising the need for additional support. I thank her, and I thank the Minister here today for answering our questions during this debate. I would also ask that perhaps in future Ministers from other Departments could come to the House to respond to the covid-19 general debates, so that we can ask specific questions and tailor our debate perhaps towards education or the Treasury—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We need to move on.

6.39 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Our thoughts are with everyone who has lost a family member or friend to this dreadful virus, and we thank people for speaking up on their behalf. I want to take this opportunity to thank and pay tribute to all the emergency workers, NHS workers, teachers, school staff, local authority workers, volunteers and local charities who have done an amazing job of work over the past nine months across the country and particularly in my constituency. They face more months of having to deal with the reality of this virus. Mass testing and a vaccine provide notes of optimism, but they will not stop the spread of the infection here and now.

It is particularly difficult for us to debate this issue in the Chamber, because the rates of infection are so very different in different areas of the country. Indeed, I have been contacted by my own constituents, asking why the regional approach was set aside in favour of a lockdown: well, I am afraid that in my area, we are starting to see the reason why. Although the infection rates are now at 135 cases per 100,000—rates that are infinitesimally lower than those in some areas in Hull, as I know from speaking to colleagues—and we have just 23 people in our local hospital, we are starting to see those rates go up. Unless we follow with great fastidiousness the restrictions that are in place, I fear that we will see the sorts of rates that have been generated in other parts of the country—all the way across the country, indeed, down to the south-east.

I know that many people are concerned about the decision to reintroduce lockdown across the country, and the implications for businesses, individuals and families, but we cannot underestimate this virus or the exponential way in which it increases. The one thing that we did learn from the first wave was the importance of the NHS being able to continue to treat everybody who needs urgent care, not just those with coronavirus, which is a point I made to the Minister during his opening statement. It is tragic that so many people died in the first nine months of the year—far more than would normally have been the case. As I mentioned to the Minister, in my constituency we saw a death rate increase of 26% compared with the same period in the previous year. We have to make sure that people who are ill for other reasons continue to seek treatment, but they will not be able to do so if there is such a rapid rate of increase in the number of people who require hospitalisation or more intensive treatments. That is why we need to make sure that this lockdown works, and that is why the Government and the Minister are taking these very difficult decisions. I urge people who have contacted me and other Members about this issue to understand that that is why the lockdown is so crucial now.

My thoughts are with those who have lost members of their family, but also with those who face a huge job of work during the winter months in keeping our schools and hospitals open for the future. Now is the time that we can take action, and we need to do so.

6.42 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The incredibly moving contributions from my colleagues, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), remind us that every death is a family member and a friend; this reaches every one of us. Today, we hear that the death toll from covid has hit 50,000, the fifth highest in the world, but the UK is only the 21st country by size of population: world-beating, but for all the wrong reasons.

Throughout the past few months, we have seen amazing acts of kindness in my constituency to keep everyone safe, to support those who are vulnerable and to protect those in need. Community groups staffed mainly by volunteers have stepped forward to supply food, from the hot meals being provided by the Open Kitchen, the gurdwara and the mosques, to the food parcels from the Hounslow Community FoodBox in Brentford and the Bridgelink food bank in Isleworth, and of course many

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

individuals have stepped forward to help their neighbours—I thank them all. Hounslow council has also stepped up in response to the new needs by providing services for local residents, such as delivering 8,000 further food packages and making 20,000 calls to those who are shielding, while working to tackle long-term problems around unemployment and job reskilling—issues that are so important, as so many of my constituents work at Heathrow airport.

That is why the incompetent approach of our national Government to key issues has been beyond frustrating. Until the Government start delivering on the covid response, infection and death rates will stay high, which means that lockdowns will have to be extended, repeated, or both. We all know that this is a challenging time for the Government and for Governments across the world, but key issues have been known about for months, yet little or nothing from the UK Government seems to change.

It is a simple truth that to control disease and infection in a population, the more testing and contact tracing that can be done, the better. We saw the fiasco at the start of September when my constituents were being sent to Cardiff, Southampton and further to get tested. We have consistently faced delayed and lost tests. I submitted written questions to Ministers asking how many test results were not returned. Shockingly, I was told that that information was not collected. If the data is not being collected, the success of the contract cannot be measured, and if it cannot be measured, there are no penalties for non-delivery. What a waste of public money.

Furthermore, a high contact tracing rate is essential to control the spread of infection, yet week after week we have seen track and trace in England—a multimillion-pound private sector operation—perform appallingly compared with public sector-run programmes in places such as Wales, which is reaching 90% of close contacts, whereas in England the figure has plunged to below 60%. Is that another missed target, or was a target contact tracing rate not included in the test and trace contract?

Before entering this place, I served as a Hounslow councillor and an office holder at the Local Government Association. If we had seen the level of cronyism, gross incompetence, spending of millions of pounds—not even billions—and targets missed in a local authority in the way that the Government are behaving, Ministers at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government would have called in the inspectors. PPE contracts have gone to companies with no ability to deliver, while competent UK companies have been ignored. When entrusted with taxpayers' money, the Government should first ask whether the public sector can do the job—GPs for testing, and public health directors for track and trace. If the public sector cannot do it, proper contracting—playing by the rules—should be essential.

6.46 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I endorse the pleas of my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey). It has been nearly 10 months since the word “covid-19” became part of our everyday vocabulary. Since then, we have seen the infection spread and businesses required to close, with

small independent shops in particular suffering in my beautiful constituency of Hastings and Rye. We have seen unemployment rise across our one nation and, sadly, many families stricken with grief at the loss of a loved one or not being able to visit them in their hour of need.

It has been a truly traumatic and harrowing year, but there have been rays of light and hope. We have seen communities rally round to support the vulnerable and individuals such as Captain Sir Tom Moore inspire us to pull together. The Government have shown true leadership by building Nightingale hospitals in record time, expanding our testing capacity to levels considered unimaginable and providing unprecedented financial support to businesses. We now see signs of a vaccine within our grasp.

I want to focus my remarks on a generation of young people who risk missing out on getting the best possible start in their careers—those who are just leaving college, have graduated this year or have completed an apprenticeship only to find that employers are not hiring, whole sectors are at risk of collapse, their futures are in limbo and their dreams of starting careers are becoming nightmares. Last week, I was contacted by a constituent in his mid-20s. He has recently trained as a pilot, having spent years studying, and is ready to embark on a fantastic career in the aviation sector. Only 10 months ago, all seemed fine, and he and his coursemates were on track to become the next generation of commercial airline pilots. Covid-19 has put a stop to that.

That constituent is not alone. My inbox has been filled with cases of youngsters starting out on their careers who are now having to move home to their parents, reskill and look for work elsewhere. Most have not yet found work at all. The kickstart scheme for 16 to 24-year-olds is very welcome, and it will go some way to helping this generation of young people, but we must think long term and prepare for life after covid-19. I urge the Government to focus on the economic recovery for sectors across the UK that have been severely hit—such as aviation, tourism and hospitality, to name but a few.

We have a generation of highly skilled young professionals—from pilots to brewers, accountants to lawyers, engineers to musicians and IT developers—all of whom are trained and ready to work, but find themselves in this period of limbo as we continue to battle the virus. We have a vaccine in sight that could begin to end this nightmare. Now must be the time to set out the long-term plan to support these industries and get them back on their feet, so that this generation of highly skilled youngsters, who are desperate and eager to get on with their lives, are not wasted and are able to find work in the sectors that they have dreamed of joining.

6.50 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank all those on the frontline at Warwick Hospital, University Hospital Coventry and Warwickshire and our care homes, as well as the police, our local council and those in our schools who have worked throughout this period. I thank all the volunteers for the extraordinary work that they have done in such extraordinary times. There has been such little respite for all of them; I commend and thank them all.

Regrettably, it is going to be impossible to address all the problems that we face in four minutes, but perhaps I could say that it would have helped greatly if the Government had been able to lead by example and been more consistent in some of their policies. For example—I have mentioned this previously—how was it that, for some reason, we could allow people to travel on an aeroplane for three and a half hours, sitting cheek by jowl, but we could not allow those same people to sit in a cinema or a theatre, on a train or a bus or elsewhere? How was it that garden centres were allowed to open, but car showrooms were not? Eventually that was agreed to, and I press again for it to be allowed now.

I will focus my comments on the impact of covid-19 on our social care sector. If I have time, I will also mention the self-employed and furlough. The public were forgiving at the outset for many months, but they are rapidly tiring, and the Government's actions are having a profound impact on their tolerance of and compliance with the guidance. That guidance is not clear; it is inconsistent, and people are struggling to follow it. We have tiers for this and tiers for that—tiers for universities and tiers for different parts of the country. But it is as we enter winter with the prospect of not being able to visit loved ones in care homes that my constituents are desperate to see family members and demand urgent action.

In the first lockdown up to 12 June, almost 20,000 residents of care homes in England died with covid-19. In fact, 28,000 excess deaths were recorded in care homes in England during the same period. In Warwickshire, we saw more than 400 excess deaths, which is why I called for—and continue to call for—an inquiry. As Amnesty International concluded in its report in early October,

“a number of decisions and policies adopted by authorities at the national and local level in England increased care home residents' risk of exposure to the virus...notably...Mass discharges from hospital into care homes of patients infected or possibly infected with Covid-19 and advice that '[n]egative tests are not required prior to transfers/admissions into the care home'.”

If Amnesty has time, I would very much welcome its representatives to Warwickshire secure this inquiry, which is essential and should have been done through the summer to prepare us for this second wave.

The ongoing restrictions have meant that people continue to be unable to visit their loved ones. It is a fact that over half of care home residents die within 15 months of moving into a care home. Many residents have now spent more than eight months without any visits from family or friends, with huge consequences for their wellbeing. Many care homes in Warwick and Leamington have stopped all visits due to the second wave, so it is critical that the Government act urgently to enable family members to visit their loved ones.

A simple action would be to amend visitor status. Organisations such as the Alzheimer's Society are urging for an acceleration of the pilot key worker status scheme to enable family members and carers with access to regular testing and PPE to visit safely and provide the care that people with dementia so desperately need. After all, SAGE states that infection rates from visitors to care homes are very low, and if visitors had access to PPE, weekly testing and infection control training, the risk would be significantly lower still. We also need to be clear about discharges from hospitals into care homes—a process that led to a significant proportion of care

home deaths in the first wave. If there is one thing that the Government could do, it would be to change the visitor status of family members so that they could see their loved ones over the coming months and allow them the dignity that they should be afforded.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I want to try to get everybody in, so I will reduce the time limit to three minutes after the next speaker.

6.54 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): As we all know, on Friday 30 October, several Members of the Cabinet held a meeting to lock down the country for a second time—a decision that all participants knew would have huge consequences for the country, for the economy, for public health and for the nation's morale. No one should be in any doubt about how difficult such a decision would have been to make. Since the beginning of this pandemic, the Government have come under criticism from many different sides. I believe that much of this has been unfair given these extraordinary circumstances. While Members have made valid points about what could have been done better, it is too easy for people to snipe from the sidelines after events have long since passed. It is far more challenging to lead.

The Government have also been accused of U-turns, but listening to MPs and the public to recognise where there have been policy mistakes and to act accordingly is an example of being a pragmatic Government. No doubt lessons have been learned, and I hope the Government are therefore developing ways in which they can deal with any future pandemic. By learning from our experience and from our partners across the world, we should be producing a “What to do in a pandemic” manual as we speak. That is what should be happening, and I do hope that it is.

I thank all who work in the NHS and social care sector, and all the key workers who have helped and continue to help us get through this period, but I also want to thank the Government. I thank them for protecting my constituents by providing the furlough scheme, the self-employment income support scheme, business grants, the uplift in universal credit, and the base floor rise. I thank the Health Secretary for all the work he has done to ensure that our hospitals remain open and covid patients receive the best possible care. Among the media flurry and the constant sniping, it is hard to remember the progress we have made since March, with the half a million tests that are being carried out daily, the thousands of ventilators that are now in operation, and the track and trace app, which has been downloaded by 20 million people. Meanwhile, while all this has been going on, Ministers have always taken the time to speak to me and to Members across the House about our concerns and those of our constituents.

I truly believe that it was courageous of the Prime Minister to inform me and fellow Conservative MPs of his regrets about the necessity to go into a second lockdown. He did this knowing that he would upset many on his own side and be harangued by some Members on the Opposition Benches. Yet he apologised and went through with what he thought was right. That is a true sign of leadership—going forward boldly for the good of the country, regardless of any potential political consequences.

6.57 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I thank all those who are working at present to keep us safe and comfortable, offer my condolences to all who have lost loved ones, and echo everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) said about the looming economic threat that is facing the north-east of Scotland.

Over of the past few weeks, I have met a number of representatives of businesses in my constituency and further afield, particularly in the hospitality sector. Their frustration at the need for continued restrictions is entirely understandable and understood. Walking through the streets of London this week, I have been struck by the number of closed bars, restaurants and shops, serving as a stark warning of what we face when the response to rising infections from this virus is inadequate to the circumstances.

In many debates over the course of the past few months, I have highlighted the shortcomings of the UK's fiscal framework with regard to the devolved Administrations—the lack of borrowing powers and the wait for Barnett figures to trickle through. Last week we also saw the fiasco of whether or not the furlough scheme would apply, with Ministers seeming to disagree with one another on that. The last-minute furlough extension by the Chancellor, while welcome, also created huge uncertainty and has led to many people losing their jobs who did not need to if only he had been more open about his intentions and not been left to be bounced into it at the last minute.

In terms of the response, particularly for the hospitality sector, we need the reduced VAT rate for tourism to continue, and non-domestic rates to continue at their current zero level. Through Barnett, we need to see that commitment in England so that it can be followed through elsewhere in the UK.

That still leaves 3 million excluded, but in the final seconds that I have, I will focus not on those who are excluded, but on those who are conspicuously included—those appointed to positions without open recruitment processes, and those who are awarded contracts without following open procurement processes. We are entitled to have assurances that the best people are shaping our responses—absolutely we do—but surely we are also entitled to the assurance that the decisions taken are justified for their impact, effectiveness and public health benefits to the many and not just for the financial benefit to the few. Throughout this crisis, under the cover of urgency, too many contracts have been awarded at too high a price that have run into too many problems and benefited too many people who are too close to the centre of power. That cannot and must not continue.

7 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): My constituents are dutifully doing everything they can to halt this deadly disease during the second lockdown. As we commemorate today those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in previous wars, we are fighting a war ourselves against an invisible enemy, so it is a timely reminder that we should also think about all our key workers and constituents, some of whom are making significant sacrifices and some of whom have paid the ultimate sacrifice in fighting this terrible war. We have seen businesses battered, religious services banned, and we have criminalised families meeting. We have seen some

unprecedented restrictions imposed on our daily lives. I fully appreciate and respect the fact that restrictions are vital in keeping the R rate low to protect our vulnerable constituents and to prevent our NHS from being overwhelmed, but we owe it to everybody to explain with robust and clear scientific evidence why we must intrude into people's lives when we do so with such significance.

For the avoidance of doubt, I fully back the health team, the Prime Minister's decisions and the Chancellor's generosity. However, here comes the dreaded "but": with Government relying on scientific advice to inform policy, as someone who is an engineer and who understands the statistical variability of forecasting, I have found it very difficult to accept how Government advisers can display a chart that shows a flat worst-case prediction curve with other curves modelling daily death rates between five and 10 times worse at their peak compared with the one they had originally modelled. I must question how we could reach such wildly different outcomes. Public compliance is key, especially while a vaccine is not yet available, but compliance will also be a function of the consistency and credibility of the information that we use to back up our decisions.

7.3 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): I am taking a slightly more optimistic approach in this debate—some may say I am a rational optimist by nature—and I am going to use the limited time I have to focus on our local jobcentres, which have played a crucial role in our response to coronavirus, working in the trenches on the economic frontline.

Universal credit is standing up to the challenge of covid-19. The Department for Work and Pensions has injected £9.3 billion into the welfare safety net, so this is an opportunity for me to highlight the work of those at the Stourbridge jobcentre, led magnificently by their regional team. All have gone above and beyond. They have risen to the challenge, working around the clock to protect livelihoods. I have thanked the team privately, but it is fitting to say thank you publicly to those who are working on the economic frontline to get people back into work.

There is no doubt that the economic impact of covid-19 will see a pool of labour seeking new opportunities, but we will also have thousands of businesses requiring the skills to enable a new business agenda. Even before the pandemic, this was a time of changing technologies because of automation, artificial intelligence and in digitalisation. The focus therefore must be on reskilling and upskilling to deliver new business models in a post-pandemic era. The world has been transformed more in the last eight months than for decades, and, with it, so has the skillset required to deliver our regional and national economic agendas.

The pandemic has accelerated the pace of change, impacting on the world of work to a degree not seen before other than in the second world war, when 5 million women entered the workforce. The gap created by departing soldiers meant opportunities for women; it led to millions of women reskilling to take jobs, making the bombs and aeroplanes, fuelling the war effort, and we can do it again. Our best vaccine against the economic impacts of covid-19 is reskilling and retraining. We must change, adapt and be innovative. We all have our own motivation to retain our fiscal wellbeing. There is also the wider fiscal motivation to rebuild our country's economic

wellbeing. We need a skills revolution, with the unemployed retrained in new technologies, creating opportunities. Sector-based work academies will have a valuable role to play.

With the Government set to roll out mass testing, not forgetting the much welcomed prospect of a vaccine, we now have some certainty that we can start to rebuild our workplaces with the confidence of making them covid-secure. How we come out of the pandemic will be a defining moment, and I am thankful that this crucial moment will come under this Government. We will come through this if we are united as one nation.

Covid has taken much from us, but it cannot take away our Remembrance. That leads me to conclude that we should not forget those who gave their today for our tomorrows, and we should also not forget those lives that have been tragically lost to the silent and ruthless killer that we know to be covid-19.

7.6 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I agree with many other contributors today that we have to use mass testing and effective self-isolation to contain the pandemic to make our local tiered approach work, so our message in Gloucester and Gloucestershire can be, “Stick with the rules now so that we can get back to almost normal on 2 December.”

Today, however, I want to focus not so much on successful containment as on the eventual exit strategy. Let me start, therefore, by paying tribute to the chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, for creating the vaccine taskforce led by Kate Bingham. First, I must make a declaration of no interest: I have never spoken to or met Kate Bingham, she has no idea who I am, and I have never been and am not an investor in any fund that she may have been responsible for. But I do know that the taskforce she leads has backed the BioNTech-Pfizer and AstraZeneca Oxford university vaccines and four others out of the 150 vaccines in development that it considered.

We now know that the Pfizer vaccine leads the scientific race and AstraZeneca may be close behind. Surely the fact that Kate Bingham secured for the UK 40 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine in June and 100 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine is immensely reassuring, and we should recognise that this quality of research, analysis and procurement could not possibly have been done from the civil service, which is why the Government and Sir Patrick, with all his previous experience of vaccine research and development and manufacturing, chose the best person for the job and did so without paying her a penny.

If we want third party evidence for what has been achieved, Professor John Bell of Oxford university said:

“It’s not a given that the UK...would have ended up where it is now without her.”

So it is disappointing that *The Sunday Times*, the Leader of the Opposition and others criticised the appointment of Kate Bingham and those of her comms team who helped the Government recruit 305,000 volunteers to give the evidence that AstraZeneca and others need to produce a well-tested vaccine. For we need both the vaccine to be approved and the anti-vaxxers to be routed for our exit strategy to work and avoid the damage done, for example, by Dr Wakefield’s anti-MMR lies 20 years ago.

Let me make three quick observations. First, the private sector, academia and the Government must work together for a successful exit strategy. Secondly, Sir Patrick said in evidence to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, in answer to a question that I put to him, that such a vaccine would normally take 15 years to create. Let us all pay tribute to those who have come so far so fast; and those who take a political stance against our great multinational pharmaceuticals need to reconsider their prejudices. These vaccines have been procured by the UK for the peoples of all four parts of the UK and if—it is not guaranteed yet—it turns out that the work of the vaccine taskforce can provide all of us with protection in our greatest hour of need, wherever is our home, we are indeed better together with one NHS, one vaccine taskforce and one United Kingdom.

7.9 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today.

It is incredible how quickly things change. The last time that I properly spoke in this Chamber about coronavirus was in September when virus rates were lower, restrictions were looser and hospitals were emptier. Covid continues to dominate us in a way that we never wanted it to do and our lives remain shaped by the battle against it. Throughout it all, however, there has been one constant: the continuing resolve of everyone to get through this.

I want to say thank you to everyone in North East Derbyshire. We know how difficult this is. We know that our ability to work, to love, to live, and to offer support is being affected every single day, and we are grateful for their forbearance at this difficult time. In the past few days, the reason for that endurance is becoming clearer. Our job of suppressing the virus was never for nothing. All along, we have been building a bridge to a time when we have other weapons to fight this problem, and the announcements of this week may be showing that we are actually starting to get there. Light is on the horizon, yet we know that we will not get there immediately. Even if solutions are coming, we still face soul-searching questions.

The first big question remaining will be one of evidence. Every day, massive decisions are being made on our behalf and we are grappling with the foundations on which these are made. In searching for evidence, we face a blizzard of data and hypotheses. Right now, within a few clicks, the web will tell us both that the case fatality rate is negligible and that it is substantial; that tests work and that they do not; that masks are life-savers and that they can be life-takers. Should we wish, we can literally choose our facts, even though only one set of those premises is actually true. It is no wonder that constituents are confused.

That leads me to the second challenge that bedevils us: uncertainty. Our natural instinct is to recoil from ambiguity, yet this virus forces us to deal with it. There is uncertainty about how it works and how it will act in the winter. The virus forces us to make decisions now on the basis of what might happen in 40 days’ time. It is a challenging mix, which, quite understandably, has worn people down. Yet our job is to deal with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. To those residents who are frustrated or anxious, I say that I am, too. But if

[Lee Rowley]

there were a quick answer, it would have been found already. If there were a single solution, it would have been used. We are here because, for now, we think that what we are doing is proportionate and the least worst option while we wait for the alternatives, and those alternatives are coming. This cannot, must not, will not last forever, but, for the first time in our history, we may actually be able to turn back a pandemic in mid-flow. If that happens, it will be the most remarkable test of our ingenuity, our resolve and our willingness to get there. I say: hold on, we will get there.

7.12 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Broadly speaking, I recognise the hard truth that lockdown 2 was necessary to keep our NHS and emergency services from being overrun. Although I would have wanted to see the tier system endure a bit longer, I recognise that it took strong leadership from the Government to make the strong calls that they have made, and I commend them for that. It is also hugely welcome to hear the news of the vaccine developments, and I recognise the huge human cost that has been spoken about a great deal this evening.

I want to focus on the economy. We are now past the point of no return with regard to that. If we choose to go back to the tiered system, it cannot come soon enough, given the lives and livelihoods put at risk by the restrictions. We need to see the UK open for business. Yes, we must take the virus seriously, but we cannot let it prevent us from living our lives. Therefore, if a new normal is necessary, we need to learn to live alongside the virus, not to hide from it.

There are certain areas that the Government would wish us to focus on right now, and it is really important that we do that. Aviation is a particular concern to me. It concerns 330,000 jobs worth more than £28 billion. This is a desperate position for aviation.

The leisure industry has also been hit harder than most. Despite reports of very low infection rates at fitness centres and outdoor sports providers, not to mention the ever-growing body of evidence of mental health benefits, they are yet to be recognised as part of the solution rather than part of the problem. We have 600,000 signatures on a petition against gym closures, and I urge the Government please to look very closely at that.

As for entertainment, although it is great to see elite sport back on TV, we cannot forget those grassroots sports providers—league 1 and league 2 clubs for example—and also the Football Association redundancies, plus the whole raft of sports all across the UK. Exhibitions employ 600,000 people, and the UK currently exports £2 billion-worth of exhibition services every year. We are a top 10 global exporter, so we must put that right as soon as we can.

Lastly, I have a few words to say about my constituency of Bracknell, if I may. These points have come directly from my constituents via correspondence over the last couple of weeks. First, the infringement of civil liberties needs to be balanced against the need to restrict the spread of the virus, so I urge the Government please to look at that balance more carefully. Some 100,000 people currently make up the cancer backlog, and we must do

some work there as well. On flu jabs, I believe there is a shortage. People are asking locally about getting them at local pharmacies and surgeries, and I again urge the Government to look at that. Finally, I would like to see a permanent Test and Trace site in Berkshire.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): If everybody took two minutes, instead of three minutes, everybody would get in. I am not going to reduce the time limit officially, but if colleagues want to be considerate to each other, that would be my advice.

7.15 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I will be as brief as I can. I want to start by paying tribute to the people of South Cambridgeshire who have helped us all to get through this pandemic—the care workers, the volunteers, the medical staff, the nurses and doctors, who have been working heroically, but also people in the private sector. I have found it very dismaying that the Opposition parties have spent so long attacking the private sector. In my constituency, those people have been developing the ventilators and doing genome decoding of coronavirus. They have developed the tests—a whole range of different tests—and they are producing them and delivering for the Government. Most of the tests are done in the private sector, not the public sector. They have developed rapid mass testing, but also the vaccine. We have heard a lot about this vaccine from Pfizer—and the whole country is hoping—but there is another from AstraZeneca, and its global headquarters are in South Cambridgeshire. We are all expecting results from that in a few weeks' time, which will hopefully be as good as the Pfizer results. Again, that is a vaccine of which the Government in their wisdom, under Kate Bingham's leadership, have bought a large stock.

In South Cambridgeshire, the balance that we have heard about from various Members—between lives and livelihoods, between lives and liberties—has required a particularly difficult decision. We have one of the lowest infection rates in the country, and we have had only one death from coronavirus in the last five months. A lot of companies have complained quite vociferously, and understandably, about the imposition of a national lockdown, but I have come to agree with the Government that it is needed, because cases have been taking off. We have been seeing that in South Cambridgeshire in recent days, and cases are now at a record level.

I want to make a few very quick suggestions of what I think the Government could do or should think about doing to help reassure the public that they have got the right balance. They could produce a cost-benefit analysis, with the quality-adjusted life years that they use in other areas; on the Treasury Committee, we have been looking at that. They could use the World Health Organisation definition of deaths, which is people who die from coronavirus, rather than with coronavirus, or if they have had it in the last 28 days. That is the standard international definition, and it is lower. They could provide an official estimate of the case fatality rate, which is the proportion of people who have the infection and die. That, by quite a few estimates, has dropped really quite sharply—by about two thirds—since the start. On 2 December, when the national lockdown ends, they could move to a more aggressive regional approach with a tier 4, which I know the Government

are thinking about. With those, I think the Government will provide a lot more reassurance that they are getting the balance right, and measures that will help us get through this.

7.18 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I promise I will keep this brief. As is often the case in these debates, we come in having written one speech and end up giving another. We have heard some great contributions today. I want to start by paying tribute to the voluntary and community groups in my communities in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton, who have absolutely risen to the challenge during these unprecedented times to support some of the most vulnerable in our community. Whether it has been delivering food, being on the end of the phone or just galvanising people together, they have been absolutely amazing. Let us face it: this is completely unprecedented. Many of us, if you had told us 12 months ago that this was going to happen, would have looked at you with amazement. To be honest, if you had told me 12 months ago that I was going to be here, I would have looked at you with amazement, but that is another story altogether.

The fact is that this is a difficult one. Last week was probably the first time in this House that I have been really torn, because we are having to find that balance with people's liberties. Yes, the public health crisis is absolutely there; we can see it in the news and we can see it in the data. Every single person impacted by covid-19 is an individual and it is a tragedy when we see those deaths happen, but it is getting to a point where constituents come to me and say, "I haven't seen my relatives in months", "There is a choice as to whether I can go to my loved one's funeral", "I cannot go because the capacity is not there," and "I cannot see my loved ones get married." It is difficult. We have seen a technological renaissance through things like Zoom and Teams and people have been able to connect, but that does not replace physical human interaction at all.

The fact is that the Government's economic response has been great, and that is what my constituents say to me. The Government have stepped up and given support to some of our most vulnerable communities through their economic response. I do not envy my colleagues on the Front Bench at all given the task ahead of them.

I am conscious of the need to keep my comments brief so that other colleagues can speak, so I shall just say this. Ultimately, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) said, we are going to have to get to a point at which we live through a new normal, because when it comes to life, we can exist or we can live. The fact is that at the moment many of my constituents feel that they are just existing, and they want to start living again.

7.20 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I wish to spend the short time that I have focusing on where restrictions on social contact have been the most damaging, which is for residents in care homes.

Last month, I was contacted by a constituent who since March has been unable to visit her 96-year-old aunt, who unfortunately suffers from dementia and Parkinson's disease. Last week, a report from the medical

journal *The Lancet* suggested that an estimated 70% of residents in UK care homes are living with dementia and memory problems. Replacing visits from recognisable loved ones with staff wearing unfamiliar and often frightening protective equipment can understandably leave residents extremely distressed. For care home residents with dementia, regular contact with friends and family is vital. The fear of many families is that when finally they are reunited with their loved ones, they will simply not remember them. That is a devastating thought.

This has been a great week for science—as the Prime Minister said, the "scientific cavalry" is on its way to help us through this pandemic—but we need to look at a more compassionate solution to protect vulnerable residents in care homes. The news that we are one step closer to an effective vaccine is fantastic and gives us cautious hope for a more normal 2021.

On testing, the scientific progress has been extraordinary, but we need to see a clearer ramping up of testing in care homes. I urge those Ministers to look into the testing of visitors who go to care homes. We should give them the ability to take a quick test and get the results coming in, even if it involves waiting for an hour, so that they can at least try to get that access and see their loved ones. I am sure that that would go a long way towards improving matters as we go forward to next year.

7.22 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I warmly welcome the encouraging developments on the vaccine front, and I am glad that my local authority, Kensington and Chelsea, will be a beneficiary of the rapid testing scheme.

I am also glad that case rates in my local authority are tailing off—in fact, in the past week they were down 28% and are now almost back down to 100 cases per 100,000, standing at 111 yesterday. Indeed, the data for London for the past week, released yesterday, shows that cases were down in 26 of the 33 boroughs and hospital admissions were also down on the week.

I strongly encourage those on the Front Bench to ensure that, when 2 December comes, we leave lockdown and review the tier that London comes out into. A case is beginning to develop that London—which is the powerhouse of our economy, accounting for 25% of our total tax revenue—should come out into tier 1. We still have a few weeks to go and I encourage Londoners to do everything that they can to get the R down and the number of cases per 100,000 down. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to give a proper focus to the tier into which London will go after lockdown.

7.24 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I am conscious of time, so despite wanting to present arguments on greater flexibility for worshippers, outdoor exercise, support for pubs—I could go on—I will not cover those things, as there have been excellent contributions on them already.

Today is a really important day of remembrance. As I have reflected on this debate, I have often considered the analogy that we are in an invisible war against the coronavirus—and it has been an invisible war. It is not a fight where we can see footage of battles won on beaches, air-raid sirens do not alert us to run for cover when the enemy is nearby, and this is not a battle where we can look our enemies in the eyes.

[Dean Russell]

Nor, though, can we see the successes of our actions. We will never know the grandparent whose life we saved simply by wearing a mask. We will never know the father who avoided the devastating symptoms of long covid simply because we washed our hands. We will never know the mother who could go to work today simply because we chose to socially distance in a shop. And, because we followed the Government guidance, we will never know the nurse who God forbid, would have held our hand as we fought the virus from a hospital bed.

Our actions have consequences. Covid-19 has no conscience; it does not care who it infects or whose life it devastates. Coronavirus has a singular goal, and that is to multiply—to spread to us all—so it is up to us all to stop it. No doubt in some laboratory there is a modern version of Alan Turing beating the code of covid, but until then it is up to every single person in this nation to fight this virus. I want to say thank you to my constituents in Watford and to people across the country for following the Government guidance—for washing their hands, wearing a mask and socially distancing. Together we can win this war, and it is through that that we will succeed.

7.26 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I will keep my comments as brief as I can. First, I welcome the excellent news this week on the vaccine. I know that we are not there yet and that “hands, face, space” is still really important, and I echo that to my constituents today. I also thank the Government for the rapid testing in County Durham.

Others have made this argument already, but the three g’s—gyms, God and golf—have filled my inbox, so if there is anything that can be done about those for 2 December or before, I would appreciate it. My constituents are really looking forward to 2 December, so I hope we do not have to see anything further beyond that.

I had a call last week with care homes in my constituency, and I will rattle through some of the issues that they raised. First, there has been some difficulty accessing flu vaccines for staff in care homes. Obviously, that is a bit of an issue with respect to transmission when they are dealing with older people. Those working in domiciliary care and going out into the community have had trouble getting testing for covid in some cases, so if there is any way that we can, perhaps, move towards weekly testing for those people, that would be brilliant.

The portal is seen as good and improving, but although the quantities have increased over recent weeks, some care homes are still having trouble getting the total quantities that they need, so anything that could be done on that would be really helpful. Finally, if there is any way that the infection control fund could be made more flexible, particularly if it could be allowed to help some care homes create facilities for better visiting, that would be great.

7.28 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden). He said so many of the things that I wanted to say, that I can cut my speech right down.

I start by paying tribute to those in Warrington South who are playing such a critical part in our battle against covid. Earlier this week, I was really pleased to hear from the Health Secretary that Warrington will receive 10,000 antigen lateral flow devices this week to start the process of mass testing. That allows the director of public health in Warrington to focus her team’s efforts and to start testing priority groups. It means we can start to tackle the challenges of children being sent home from school, and help students, teachers and parents to live their lives in a bit more of a normal fashion.

Having grown that capacity, we can also do regular tests in the NHS to try to tackle some of the transmission in hospitals. It is really important to keep people safe when they go there for regular testing. Over the last two weeks, Warrington Hospital has been piloting testing for all patient-facing staff. It has tested around 3,900 in total. It really surprised me that there were only 50 positive asymptomatic cases—less than 2%. That is a really worthwhile exercise.

The news that Pfizer’s vaccine has achieved a 90% success rate in more than six countries, with 43,500 volunteers, is very welcome, but I want to praise in particular and support the vaccine taskforce and its chair, Kate Bingham. We seem to have a bit of a problem that, when someone in the private sector gives up their time—unpaid—to work for the national interest, Opposition Members and parts of the media seem to go out of their way to bring them down. I was particularly interested in the comment by Sir John Bell, the professor of medicine at Oxford University, who was clear in saying that, if it were not for her, the 30 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine would not be arriving in this country. This lady deserve our grateful appreciation, not smears and division.

7.30 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter). I agree that the work of the vaccine taskforce has been superb. It is one of the reasons why we are first in a lot of queues; we are ahead of EU states, for example. I thank all the careworkers and NHS staff on the Isle of Wight for the wonderful work they do. In the short time I have, I will make two brief points: on data and on strategy.

First, we all agree that, in a free state, rather than a police state, Government need to be respected and trusted and part of that trust surely rests on the use of data. We all remember how Labour was destroyed over what it said on the Gulf war and the dodgy dossiers. We cannot go down that route again with data. So does the Minister share my concern that so many people, including reputable scientists, have raised significant issues about how we are using data and the transparency of data? For me, the answer to that question is for the Government to become fully transparent with all the science and, in the spirit of the great national endeavour we are in, allow and encourage examination of that data by independent scientists, preferably prior to decision making, not commenting afterwards and finding significant flaws in the data. That data should include the full cost of lockdowns: medical, social and economic, and short and medium term.

Secondly, may we please have a strategic approach to this problem? It would be wonderful if a vaccine works perfectly, but that is unlikely and waiting for a magic

bullet is not a strategy but the absence of one. If we have a clear strategy and clear use of data, it will be much easier for the Government to turn to Conservative Members and ask us for the support they will need in the weeks and months ahead.

7.32 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): On this day of remembrance, I pay tribute to all those who made the ultimate sacrifice so that we can stand here today with the freedoms we hold dear. Let me also formally put on the record my congratulations to President-elect Joe Biden and Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris. We look forward to working together to tackle this global pandemic.

We have heard today that the UK has tragically become the first country in Europe to pass 50,000 covid-19 deaths. That speaks to why we are all here today to discuss the greatest challenge of our time. We have heard some superb speeches in the debate. I pay special tribute to Mary Hutchins, the nan of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who does her community proud. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), who was incredibly powerful in speaking up for Jamie and his family.

My hon. Friends the Members for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) all rightly raised the murky world of procurement and the complete lack of transparency. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) spoke movingly about the need to do better for those in care homes.

There is a clear sense of hope about the prospect of a vaccine. It has come at the end of a particularly bleak year that has left none untouched by the effects of the virus, but we need to ensure that this is not false hope. There must be a clear plan for manufacture and distribution. With little time to get that right, can the Minister please outline how the Government will ensure that those deemed a priority to receive the initial dose will be able to access it?

On the topic of priority groups, in June, the Health and Social Care Secretary said that the Government would consider black, Asian and minority ethnic groups as a priority for a vaccine, but that does not seem to be the case now. Why? I have seen at first hand patients in intensive care fighting for their lives because of this virus. I was overwhelmed by how many of them were from our BAME communities. Is it not possible for the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to consider multiple risk factors when rolling out the vaccine? What about all those adults who have been shielding for months? Throughout the summer they urged the Government not to forget them. What is the Government's message for them today?

Finally on a potential vaccine, I sincerely hope that we are successful, but if there are setbacks that mean that the vaccine is not rolled out until later in 2021 the Government must have a plan in place that is communicated effectively to the public and outlines what restrictions may look like. I hope to see the Government planning for that scenario, so that as a nation we are not caught off guard again by the virus.

Sadly, people feel left behind. They need to feel that they have a Government on their side. The feeling of isolation and loneliness needs urgent attention from the Government this winter. The Minister for Patient Safety,

Mental Health and Suicide Prevention tweeted only a couple of days ago that mental health services have never closed, and have continued throughout, but for many, especially those who rely on group therapies, that has not been the reality.

It is important that we do not forget those who need to access mental health services for the first time and simply do not know where to turn. Our wedding industry, talented people involved in the arts, musicians, photographers and small family-run businesses feel as if no one is listening to them. The Government did them a great disservice by describing their careers as unviable—that cut to the core of who they are, the talents that they have and the way in which they give back to our economy. I have heard from people in the industries that I have mentioned who felt that the Government were questioning their viability not just in the workplace but as husbands, wives and parents. That has affected their mental health greatly. When Ministers come to the House, they must take responsibility for the language that they use and understand the detrimental knock-on effects that it can have on people's mental health. Artists, creatives and entrepreneurs need a Government who are on their side, showing them that they care not only about their livelihood but about their mental health. How will they be supported through the winter?

As the days become shorter at a time when people are missing their families and way of life, what provisions are in place for anyone who needs help with their mental ill health? What support will be offered to organisations and communities across the country that are lifelines to people who rely on them for a bit of brightness in their day? Is there a plan for a comprehensive national real-time monitoring system for suspected suicides that will allow us to monitor and respond to new concerns among particular groups of people or in particular areas of the country? I am sure, whatever side of the House we are on, we agree that that is important. What is the Government's suicide prevention strategy in the light of covid-19?

Many people with serious mental illnesses have been feeling left out of the Government's strategy to tackle covid-19, with research finding that people with a pre-existing mental health diagnosis were 65% more likely to be diagnosed with covid-19 than those without such a diagnosis. Will the Minister outline any work that the Government are conducting to provide assistance for people with schizophrenia, psychosis or borderline personality disorder?

Members have raised many times in the Chamber the fact that expectant mothers are suffering immeasurably because they cannot bring a birthing partner with them into hospital, whether to accompany them to tests to check on their unborn baby, or when they are giving birth. What support has been offered to those suffering from post-natal depression? Some expectant mothers, and fathers, have had to endure the worst and find out that they are miscarrying. What support is available to mothers who have to be told that alone, and break down on the phone trying to tell their partner or a loved one? We have to do better for those people.

What support has been offered to mental health trusts for the winter? Are they able to access funding to support the safe discharge of patients from hospital in the light of the second spike? It is crucial that this is given the attention it deserves.

[Dr Rosena Allin-Khan]

I welcome the announcement of routine testing for frontline NHS staff. We have been requesting that for months, and it is an important development not only for protecting staff but for infection control in healthcare settings. There have been other changes to testing, and I would like to take this opportunity to pick up on plans for the mass distribution of lateral flow tests. What resources are being allocated to the local councils that are getting access to 10,000 lateral flow tests, including in my borough of Wandsworth, to make this a success? For areas with a disproportionately high number of vulnerable groups, how will the Government address any strain on council resources?

After weeks of unnecessary delay, the Government have now addressed the need to get students home safely over Christmas, and tests will be made available. How do they plan to work with universities and local councils to ensure that rapid and accurate testing is available for all students who need it? How will the tests be administered, and are the Government prepared to comment on what students should do in January?

We must understand that our students have endured a particularly difficult time, with the exams fiasco, being told it was safe to go to university, arriving at university only to be made to feel responsible for the second spike of covid-19, and then being trapped in dormitories with strangers, unable to leave to do their shopping or see their families. We have to get this right for our students, who we are allowing to go home over the Christmas holidays.

We have a long road ahead, and we cannot lose hope. The Government need to get their response to this crisis right, and they do not have to spend taxpayers' money on PR consultants to do so. For many months, brave people across the country have played their part in fighting this virus. We cannot let them down now.

7.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate and to the tone of it. I add my personal thanks to all those who are working on the frontline and in public services. This has been an incredibly difficult year for those individuals, and there is arguably much work still to be done.

I would also like to add my thanks to the armed forces. We heard powerful speeches earlier this afternoon on everything that our armed forces have done, but they have also contributed enormously to our ability to tackle the pandemic so far through the distribution of PPE, rolling out mobile testing centres, building Nightingale hospitals and being involved in the important planning for the roll-out of a vaccine when one is fully approved.

I would like to thank all those who brought to this place today stories of personal loss—in particular, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who told us of the sad loss of her family member this week, and my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), who told us so poignantly about Jamie.

From many of the contributions, it is clear that hopes for a vaccine are running high following the encouraging news of the phase 3 trial results from Pfizer and BioNTech

on Monday, and I share that sense of optimism. Science, academia, life sciences and private and public institutions have worked together. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) said, we would not be here without such endeavours from the private sector working with us. It is a promising development, and the UK is ahead of the game in securing an order for 40 million doses.

I would like to thank the head of the vaccine taskforce. The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) said that she was “impressive” and on top of her brief. I could not have put it better than my hon. Friends the Members for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and for Warrington South (Andy Carter). It is under her leadership that this is one of many vaccine candidates that we have secured. There are six in total, two at phase 3. We have placed orders for a further 300 million doses from the five other candidates, which are yet to report. That also includes the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine; my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) highlighted the endeavours of AstraZeneca in Cambridge.

I share the sense of optimism, but I also want to associate myself with the words of caution that many Members have expressed, including my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox). It is worth reiterating that the MRHA will not approve a vaccine unless it is clinically safe. There are still many unknowns. Until a vaccine is rolled out, we will not know how long its effects will last or its impact on reducing transmissions, and there are no guarantees.

The hon. Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) articulated the importance of making sure that people have accurate information to ensure that they take up vaccines. I assure her that the Government are working hard to ensure that people feel confident in the vaccine roll-out. We are working with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, cross-Government, and with technology companies to ensure that we limit misinformation and promote positive messages to get as much uptake of vaccination as we can. If this or any other vaccine is approved, we will be ready with a large-scale vaccination programme, which is being worked on at the moment.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) and for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) for their optimism in outlining the progress that we have made so far and how hard people have worked.

One point in particular that I would like to pick up on is about PPE. When the pandemic started, we produced 1% of our PPE needs in the UK. By December, we will be providing 70% of the amount that we expect to use at the rates anticipated in December for all items except gloves. That is enormous progress. It is an industry that has been built from scratch, and it has been replicated through testing and diagnostics across the country. I would like to thank everyone involved.

But it has been tough, and nowhere has it been tougher—we have heard about how difficult it is—than for those with members of their family in care homes. We heard about that from my hon. Friends the Members for Beaconsfield, for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) and for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey), and my

right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones). I pay tribute to the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), who has to perform an incredibly difficult balancing act. It is a terribly hard time for families and residents, but also for care home staff. Their first duty is to keep their residents safe.

Last Thursday, guidance was published to enable care home providers, families and local professionals to find the right balance between the benefits of visiting and the risk of transmission. Care home visits will be allowed to develop further via trials to allow more visits supported by testing. Care homes, like GPs, can access free PPE via the portal until March, so if people are not signed up, I would encourage them to do so.

On testing, the House should also be encouraged by the pilots, and I thank those hon. Members who were grateful for the roll-out of testing. I also thank all those hospitals, such as Warrington, which have run pilots for us. We cannot learn without developing these systems. We have the pilots in Stoke-on-Trent and Liverpool in whole-town and city testing, and we are now in a position to roll out twice-weekly testing for all NHS staff, something that I am grateful the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) mentioned. It is essential for the safety of patients and staff alike.

I will move on to international restrictions, because, despite the positive developments, the national restrictions for England, which this House voted for last week, are as important as ever. Although I hear the calls of colleagues, we must remember that we are here to protect lives. However, I fully take on board that we are also here to protect livelihoods. I have heard the contributions on how the measures have impacted on businesses, and I recognise the strength of feeling on that.

Bob Seely: Will the Minister give way?

Jo Churchill: I have only two minutes left. I would be happy to take the matter up with my hon. Friend afterwards.

I cannot speak for the Chancellor, but I know he will have heard the contributions of hon. and right hon. Friends, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset, to ask him to listen to those who pay themselves through dividends. However, we have had an unprecedented package of support, including some £200 billion since March and the furlough scheme, which has protected the jobs of some 9 million people. I am married to a small business owner. Some 99% of all businesses in this country are SMEs, and 95% of them are micros. This is hard, and nobody is denying that.

On data, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), because that it is important. I note the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), but the scientific picture last week was bleak and the consequences, as we have seen, come in the 10 days after, with rising numbers of admissions and, tragically, deaths. The R rate last week was above 1 in every single region of the country. The virus is growing more quickly in older populations, and the number of cases in the over-60s in England doubled between 14 October and 4 November. That is why it was imperative to take action. As we deliver the vaccination, it will be the JvCI that determines how we roll it out and the risk stratification on which we do it.

We must persevere. I understand the weariness of people, but I close by echoing the words of many—I am sure all of us—and paying tribute to the NHS and care staff, who I know are exhausted. They will be so important in helping us get through this winter and, we hope, in delivering a safe and effective vaccine. I pay special tribute not only to the general practice community pharmacies and community health teams, but all workers on the frontline. There are some unsung heroes of the pandemic, and I want them to know how much we value them. It is through such incredible contributions that we will see this through to a brighter day.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered covid-19.

PETITION

Welfare of horses in Wellingborough

7.53 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I rise to present a petition at the request of my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) on behalf of his constituents, as he cannot be here to present it himself as he is shielding. His petition is about how we protect vulnerable horses who are mistreated by their owners, particularly those horses on the Embankment in Wellingborough. He has asked that the petition be read by the Clerk at the Table.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The Clerk will now read the text of the petition, as allowed under Standing Orders.

The Clerk at the Table read the petition, which was as follows:

[The Humble Petition of the residents of Wellingborough, Northamptonshire and the surrounding areas,

Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that laws regarding the welfare of horses should be reformed and enforced to protect vulnerable horses who are mistreated by their owners on the grounds that the current laws leave the 'codes of practice' open to debate and opinion, resulting in horses being neglected by their owners as the law is open to interpretation. In particular, the horses who reside by the Embankment in Wellingborough are neglected food, water and shelter, resulting in these animals having a poor-quality life.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs to introduce reforms to laws regarding the welfare of horses and to work with The Borough Council of Wellingborough and the RSPCA to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to protect the welfare of the horses on the embankment in Wellingborough.

And your Petitioners, as duty bound, will ever pray, &c.]

[P002623]

Coventry Blitz: 80th Anniversary

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

7.55 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting me this Adjournment debate to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the November 1940 bombing of Coventry.

The Coventry blitz was, of course, a defining moment in the history of my city, bringing both great hardship and change to Coventry. It is also, I feel, an important event to recall during the current pandemic. In this year of great hardship, many have sought to look back at the blitz as a blueprint for how communities can come together and overcome the toughest of circumstances. I am sure that all would agree that Coventry, the phoenix city which rose from the rubble to post-war success, is an inspirational tale for this time.

As a key centre of wartime production, Coventry, a pioneering engineering and manufacturing city, was a prime target. Indeed, prior to the air raid on 14 November, it had already been the victim of a number of smaller air raids. But the events of 14 November 1940 were different. Over 11 hours, nearly 500 bombers dropped over 500 tonnes of high explosives, 30,000 incendiaries, and 50 landmines on the city. The sheer scale of the destruction would lead to the Germans inventing a new word, Coventration or to Coventrate, to describe the level of devastation. In that one night, just over half the city's housing stock, approximately 43,000 houses, was damaged or destroyed. There was also widespread damage to factories, shops, workplaces and, as it was in the centre of the city, civic buildings. Most famously, an incendiary device landed on Coventry's cathedral, destroying the medieval church of St Michael's. On a visit to the city following the bombing, King George VI is said to have wept as he surveyed the ruins.

There was also an incredibly high human cost. The official death toll from the night was 554 people. A further 865 people were seriously injured. Among the disruption and the building rubble, many more were never accounted for.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): I join my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour in paying tribute to the brave people of Coventry's home front who, on 14 November 1940, endured a blitz that destroyed 15 factories and 43,000 homes. I honour individuals' quiet acts of courage and selflessness that enabled them to endure devastation, and to rebuild in a spirit of peace and reconciliation. As my hon. Friend has said, during this pandemic we are reminded of what it is to come together and to endure uncertain times. I honour the fortitude and sacrifices of our veterans and civilians, and reflect on how those qualities are still with us today. Will my hon. Friend join me in that reflection?

Colleen Fletcher: Of course I will join my hon. Friend in that and I will come on to those qualities, which are renowned in Coventry. People know about the communities in Coventry.

As I was saying, those people would later be commemorated in a number of mass funerals. Today, a monument still stands in the London Road cemetery.

Almost every Coventry family who had members present in the city at the time have a story about the Coventry blitz. Those stories live on, often through children and grandchildren, and certainly through many publications. They include stories that range from the incredible to the tragic. There are stories about children and families who had spent 11 hours crouching in shelters. One man recalled being pursued down a street by a knee-high river of boiling butter from a nearby blazing dairy. An abandoned tram was blown clean over a house and into a garden—it landed with its windows still intact. There were reports the morning after of a lone fireman watching helplessly while the buildings were still burning. For one family, all that remained of their home was the washing line pole, which was found streets away in a school playground.

The story of the Coventry Blitz was also important in my family. My parents were both in Coventry on that night. They did not discuss the war very often with us when we were children, but from speaking to my siblings—I have two sisters and a brother—I know that we all had the same recollections of things that they had said about that night. My father was 15 years old in 1940, and he watched the devastation from Stoke Heath common, which is in my constituency. It is not far from where he lived and a couple of miles from the city centre. He always spoke about the sky over the city centre having an immense red glow. He went on to join the Royal Navy when he was old enough to do so, and caught the last year of the war. My mother was just 12, and lived not far from the centre of Coventry, in Howard Street.

Mum spent that night under the stairs, as many did; that was where she spent the nights when there were bombing raids. Amazingly, when she emerged in the morning, she discovered that not one pane of glass had been broken in their house. Many other streets nearby were not so lucky, but this demonstrates just how much the bombing was concentrated in the city centre. My grandad was an ARP warden and was out on duty that night. We still have his white steel helmet with a "W" on it. It also has an "FW" on it, as he was a fire watcher. It is a stark reminder of the dangers faced that night.

The days and weeks after 14 November took a heavy toll on the people of Coventry. Visitors from Mass-Observation noted that the night

"had left people practically speechless".

The day after the air raid, one observer, Tom Harrisson, noted that

"the size of the town meant nearly everyone knew someone who was killed or missing. The dislocation is so total that people easily feel that the town itself is killed. 'Coventry is finished' and 'Coventry is dead' were the key phrases of Fridays talk. There were more open signs of hysteria, terror and neurosis observed in one evening than during the whole of the rest of the past two months in all areas."

He went on to say:

"The overwhelmingly dominant feeling on Friday was the feeling of utter helplessness"—

and it

"had left people practically speechless in many cases."

The reporting goes on to capture how many people felt powerless amid such widespread destruction. There were also practical issues with the gas, electric and water supply, which had been damaged in the bombing. Many woke up to find themselves unemployed, with their

workplaces having been hit heavily in the air raid. For many, it might well have felt as though life would never be the same.

Yet, despite of all the challenges, the city was neither dead nor finished. The people of Coventry rose to the challenge of rebuilding the city, and what followed was a testament to the power of community and the courage of those who had seen such destruction. They came from all backgrounds and all walks of life. There were air raid wardens, auxiliary firemen and members of the home guard and the Women's Voluntary Service. Help also came from churches and community organisations, and from extended families determined to help each other out. It will be surely lost on no one that these pillars of community continue to be vital, especially at times such as the present. To paraphrase one observer, acts of individual courage following the bombing could fill a book, and they have.

Following that night, 1,800 members of the armed forces were brought to Coventry to help with the repairs. Within the first few weeks, basic repairs had been carried out on 12,000 homes. Within a fortnight, many of the bombed factories had already started production. That meant that 80% of the workers who had been made unemployed after the bombing were back at work, a feat that was hailed by much of the national press at the time.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, and I commend her for securing this Adjournment debate. She was speaking about the psychological trauma that so many Coventrians felt, and I sensed that when I arrived in the city in the early '80s. She also described the utter devastation, and the obliteration of the city. The fact that the people of Coventry rebuilt their industries and their factories and switched them to munitions, and got aircraft back into manufacture, was an extraordinary feat. That is what says so much about the people of Coventry.

Colleen Fletcher: Indeed, and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

It is for those reasons that the phoenix became a symbol of Coventry, symbolising Coventry's rising from the ashes and renewing itself against the odds. It was this spirit that would be at the heart of Coventry's post-war revival. Out of the rubble and the ashes of the second world war, Coventry's industries would thrive. That in turn would drive the growth of the city. A wealth of jobs and opportunities brought many to Coventry, first from the rest of the UK and Ireland and later from the Commonwealth.

As I have already mentioned, the memory of the Coventry blitz lives on in the city. Some of the legacies are physical and tangible, and the most obvious are in the remains of the old cathedral, which stand as a solemn reminder of that night. Some of the names of those who gave so much to the city live on in city landmarks. Many of my constituents may well have been pupils at Sidney Stringer or Pearl Hyde schools, both of which were named after councillors who played a leading role during the war and in the reconstruction of the city that followed. The latter was a councillor for the then Walsgrave ward in my constituency, and she was the first female Lord Mayor of Coventry during the war. She led the Women's Voluntary Service in the city and was awarded an MBE for her efforts during the blitz.

The blitz has been commemorated regularly in the city. A particular highlight was in 1990 on the 50th anniversary, when Coventry was visited by the Queen Mother. Of course, this year we will sadly not have the opportunity to commemorate and honour the memory of the Coventry blitz in a similar fashion. However, regardless of social distancing, we will be able to honour the spirit and the lessons of the event. It is worth recognising the powerful message of peace and reconciliation that has come from that night.

The experience of the blitz spurred Coventry to look outwards and offer support and solidarity to cities around the world facing tragedy. In 1942, the first twinning of cities happened when Coventry was twinned with Stalingrad in recognition of the plight of that city during the German invasion. Alongside aid, a tablecloth with the embroidered names of 900 Coventry women was sent to the city of Stalingrad. The link between the two cities continues to this day, showing that out of the horror of war can come hope and friendship. Perhaps an even more powerful statement can be seen in Coventry's twinning with the German cities of Kiel and Dresden, demonstrating clearly a desire to see peace and reconciliation triumph over the hatred of the war years.

Today, Coventry cathedral still does vital work across the world to foster peace and understanding between communities. The International Cross of Nails Schools network supports schools that seek to cross sectarian divides, in Northern Ireland, South Africa, Israel, Palestine and many more. All this is inspired by the strength of feeling that came from that night that there was a brighter and more peaceful future for both the city of Coventry and the wider world. It is this desire to look to the future as a community against all odds that is most important for us to remember and recognise. In the face of all the horror and fear, ordinary citizens did extraordinary things. Out of the ashes of that night, Coventry rose like a phoenix. In the years following the war, it thrived, becoming home to many more who have surely drawn on this historic spirit.

It goes without saying that the story of the Coventry blitz—a story of courage and community, of resilience and reconciliation—is worthy of recognition. I am grateful to be given the opportunity in this place to recall and commemorate the Coventry blitz: the most horrific event in my city's history. I am grateful for this chance to applaud the courage, spirit and resilience of the people of Coventry, both for those who were there and those like me, who grew up with memories of the night, and finally, to hope—that, for the future, resources will always be available to keep reminding people of all these things. Lest we forget.

8.11 pm

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) for a very moving contribution. I welcome this important debate, and congratulate her on securing it.

Although almost 80 years have passed, as we reflect on what happened that night many people will have in mind the ruins of Coventry cathedral, which the hon. Member mentioned as a poignant reminder of the scars that those raids left on the city. As she will know, Coventry was a major manufacturing centre for the British aircraft industry. It built its reputation, and

[Johnny Mercer]

showed it time and again during the first world war and the second world war, but that manufacturing industry also made it a target. The Luftwaffe raid on the night of 14 November 1940 was designed to stifle that proud city's history and innovation.

For the Nazi regime, the battle of Britain was not the end of the argument on air power, and, one step ahead of the allies, they had developed a new targeting system to get their bombers on target. Using this very system, on 14 November at just past 7 o'clock in the evening, the first aircraft—KG 100s—flew over Coventry, dropping flares to illuminate the city for the following waves of bombers. As the hon. Member said, for around 11 hours Coventry was shaken by bombs as they fell throughout the night. The last bombs fell at about 5.30 the following morning of 15 November. The devastation left behind was absolutely unprecedented at the time. Firefighters from across the east midlands raced to Coventry to desperately battle the flames that roared across the city, but their bravery saw some three dozen of their own killed, proving fruitless against the rain of incendiaries. The ruins of the Cathedral Church of St Michael stand in mute testimony to the horrors of that evening.

In the aftermath of the raid, our military leaders' thoughts turned to how the Germans had been able to operate with impunity to such tragic effect over Coventry. Although it is a persistent and widely published claim that Churchill sacrificed Coventry to keep British code-breaking a secret, this is a myth. Enigma and signals intelligence had some prior understanding that Moonlight Sonata—the general name that the Germans gave the raid—would target a midlands city, but they did not know which one. As the events that night showed, even knowing that crucial information would not have been enough to avoid the onslaught. Sadly, that night Coventry paid the price for defences that had proved to be entirely inadequate. Despite a raid lasting for 10 hours on one target, RAF night fighters did not shoot down a single bomber. This was undoubtedly a heartbreaking and frustrating experience for the Royal Air Force, whose heroics only a few months earlier had secured the daylight skies from German aggression in the battle of Britain.

In the skies at night, it was very different. This was not for lack of endeavour, for though the RAF night fighters had launched over 120 sorties, desperately searching the night skies for German bombers, this was a form of aerial defence very much in its infancy. Aircrew were sorely lacking the training and tools for the task; furthermore, they faced an almost impossible task against an enemy that held all the cards, for the onus was on the RAF to find them and intercept them in darkness across the vastness of the night skies. The ground-based radar system was optimised to track bombers approaching the coast, but not inland, and was not accurate enough to allow the RAF fighters close enough for visual contact. Even if they had been able to see them, the night fighter aircraft were little faster than their adversaries—barely able to catch the lumbering German bombers, never mind shoot them down. Only one German bomber was lost that whole evening, and that fell victim to an anti-aircraft gun battery near Loughborough.

However, the tragic events that unfolded that night over Coventry are not the end of the story, for this was to be one of a number of catalysts to drive forward significant developments. Those early systems that had failed in terms of detection and training over Coventry would be refined, tried, tested and improved, over and over again, to provide the capabilities that the Royal Air Force employs today. The modern Royal Air Force systems can trace their roots right back to those years. Through the development of its integrated air surveillance and control system, the Royal Air Force has built on the principles founded by the Chain Home radar system to deliver it on a far grander and more comprehensive scale. Through a complex array of overlapping radar and information built up through military, civilian and our NATO partners' networks, our air personnel are able to keep a watchful eye on the whole of the UK airspace and beyond.

Through that constant vigilance, threats are now identified and appropriate actions taken, scrambling Typhoon interceptor aircraft where necessary. These are a far cry from their sluggish night fighter forebears: the Typhoons can zero in on aircraft faster than the speed of sound, and are guided to their targets' locations with unerring precision. These interceptors, which together with our comprehensive air and space surveillance system form part of the United Kingdom's quick reaction alert, are on duty every hour of every day. They now keep our country safe and prevent unchallenged encroachment of our airspace. Against the backdrop of an uncertain world, we need these skills and this training as much as we ever have.

If the events of Coventry have taught us anything, it is that we cannot take the defence of the United Kingdom for granted. It is telling that what befell the city that night was not due to a lack of human spirit or effort, which the people of Great Britain have shown time and again—that night and since—but was the consequence of an enemy operating its technological advances. It is therefore right that we continue to support our armed forces: to recognise their efforts, reward their bravery, and give them the tools and technologies to succeed. In doing so, we should continue to strive to ensure that we can defend them against the threats we face today, through our determination that we will never again see an attack like the blitz on Coventry 80 years ago. We learned the lessons, and as I said earlier today, if we are to truly honour and remember those who sacrificed, we have to learn and change what we do to make sure it can never happen again.

From a city that suffered a similar blitz—Plymouth—the city that I represent, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady. What is extraordinary about these cities is their ability to regenerate and to never give up, and that extraordinary spirit saw that generation through the war. I am sure that her relatives, whom she spoke of tonight, would be very proud of her for having secured this really important debate about a terrible tragedy that we must redouble our efforts to ensure never happens on this nation's soil again.

Question put and agreed to.

8.19 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 11 November 2020

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

North of England: Economic Support

9.30 am

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I am sure that hon. Members are familiar with the new rules regarding Westminster Hall debates, so please respect social distancing and clean your microphones before and after you use them. Only Members on the call list may be here. This is an over-subscribed debate, so will those due to speak in the latter stages please use the seats at the back?

Bear in mind that, if you are sitting at a microphone and you have spoken, you can move. You are not required to stay for the winding-up speeches, so you can leave if you wish; you do not have to come back for the winding-up speeches, but if there is space, you are welcome to do so.

The House will observe a two-minute silence at 11 am in remembrance of those killed in conflict. The beginning and end of the silence will be marked by the Division bells. I will suspend the sitting before 11 am so that Members can leave the Chamber to observe the silence.

9.31 am

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for the economy in the north of England.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I declare an interest as a metro Mayor.

Today's debate takes place amid an unprecedented economic crisis affecting the whole country, but covid has only reinforced an argument that was already undeniable. We need to level up the north—not by tinkering at the margins, but through a full-scale transformation; not just for the sake of the north, but for the sake of the whole country. The question is, of course, whether the Government will make it happen.

Covid has hit the north hard. We have a disproportionate number of cases and hospitalisations, and the pandemic has affected deprived areas more—and the north still has far too many deprived areas. Our economy has been equally exposed. In South Yorkshire, the level of people claiming unemployment-related benefits is now higher than at any time since the mid-1990s, when we were in the aftermath of the pit closures. We risk undoing a quarter of a century of painful progress. The brutal reality is that the north is now on course for levelling down, not levelling up.

Meanwhile, the issues that made the case for levelling up in the first place have not gone away. The UK has the worst regional inequality of any comparable nation. We have unacceptably unequal education and health outcomes. Many northern council areas are among the most left behind in the UK. In the five years following the launch of the northern powerhouse, the number of our children living in poverty went up by one third, to 800,000.

Policy choices have made, or threaten to make, the situation worse. Planned cuts to universal credit could leave one in three working-age households in the north £1,000 a year worse off. Under austerity, public spending fell by £3.6 billion in the north, even as it rose by £4.7 billion in the south-east and the south-west.

Therefore the need for levelling up is clear, but there is a flipside to all this—the great potential and the strengths that make the positive argument for levelling up. We are still the heartland of British industry. South Yorkshire, for example, has amazing companies such as ITM Power, helping to build a hydrogen-fuelled clean energy revolution, and Magtec, developing contactless magnetic gears for wind turbines. Those enterprises reflect the north's storied history of manufacturing prowess, but we also have huge strengths in culture, sport and tourism; incredible natural beauty; and world-class universities with fantastic strengths in research and skills. Together, we really can create a better economy, not just for our regions but for the whole UK, and help to drive the transformations that we all badly want to see. It is estimated that if we do rebalance national investment, that could add £97 billion to our economy by 2050.

However, we have not just shown our potential; we have also shown that we can use it. We can do our bit if we are given the tools; as the only MP with the somewhat unusual privilege of also being a metro Mayor, I know that at first hand. Since I became the Mayor in 2018, we have created or protected 15,000 jobs in South Yorkshire; our pioneering Working Win programme has helped 6,000 people with health conditions who want to get back to work; we have leveraged £319 million of investment and awarded more than £100 million for regeneration and redevelopment; and we have just committed £5.5 million of our own funds to kickstart nine flood prevention projects. We are putting our skin in the game and laying down a challenge for the Government to do their part, rather than waiting for them to take the initiative. I can safely say that we stand ready to be levelled up, and I know that my counterparts across both sides of the political divide in the north would say the same.

We are not coming to this debate today with a begging bowl: we have the need and the potential, and we have shown that we are ready. The north, perhaps more than anywhere, is where we will do the job of building a better Britain for all of us. What we are asking for is the tools to get on with that job, but we have not received them yet.

We have been quite successful recently in attracting funds into South Yorkshire, but none of that money, apart from the £30 million of gainshare that we are getting following our devolution deal, represents new resources specifically targeted at South Yorkshire, the north or even disadvantaged areas more widely. These are existing funds that have come under our control, such as the adult education budget; or a share of national funds that we have been allocated or successfully bid for on the same basis as any other region, such as the Transforming Cities fund. Do not get me wrong—it is hugely important that that money is being spent under local control and we are grateful for it, but this is not levelling up.

There is a similar picture across the north. There are a few exceptions. The towns fund is perhaps the most obvious, but it leaves out hundreds of very deprived

[Dan Jarvis]

towns in favour of some wealthier areas, and it is only a one-off £3.6 billion fund spread across the whole country. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm today how much new money the Government have put into levelling up since they took office, because the overall picture is one of tinkering and not transforming.

An indication of what we need is the UK2070 Commission's recommendation: to triple the new UK shared prosperity fund to £15 billion a year for 20 years, which would be a total of £200 billion of new funding. That is for all deprived areas, but it shows the scale that we should be talking about. The moment to do that was at the comprehensive spending review, but in the current crisis it is understandable that the Government are carrying out a more modest one-year review instead. However, that must not become an excuse to delay the transformative investment we need if levelling up is really to mean something.

Already, over two thirds of northerners believe that the Government will not follow through on levelling up; that is a concern that the 55 Conservative MPs who wrote to the Prime Minister last month—we will hear from one of them in a moment—seem to share. We all have an interest in proving those fears wrong, and here is where I think we need to start.

In the short term, we need better covid emergency support, including adequate funding for hard-pressed local authorities, but the key issue is that the reduced spending review should retain real ambition. First, it must extend the local growth fund, which expires in March. The LGF has been absolutely critical in generating jobs, investment and regeneration, and it would be great to hear a commitment to extend it from the Minister today. However, LGF renewal is only enough for us to stand still. For transformation, we need something much more like a new deal for the north.

In my patch, we think that that would look like our renewal action plan, which calls for funding and powers to expand kickstart and apprenticeship schemes, begin a massive investment in infrastructure and decarbonisation, increase active travel and plant millions of trees. Will the Minister confirm today what plans the Government have for investment at this transformational scale across the north?

Transport will be especially key. Northern Powerhouse Rail is often presented as the infrastructure that will be at the heart of levelling up, but there are growing fears that critical parts of it could be delayed, along with the north-east leg of High Speed 2. It is hard to overstate how damaging that would be for the levelling-up agenda.

Lastly, the Government should make some critical structural changes, especially reforming the Green Book to reduce the in-built bias towards more affluent areas in Government investment decisions and following through on proposals to move significant parts of the civil service. Perhaps the Minister could update us on that today. Of course, beyond the spending review, the new shared prosperity fund must also embed the same ambitions. Like the European Union funds that it replaces, it must be based heavily on need. It should be as devolved as practically possible. All this is not just about making the northern economy bigger; it is about making it better—more high-tech and more high value, more sustainable and more equitable.

My ambition for the north is for it to be stronger, greener and fairer. That should be our aim for the whole United Kingdom. Covid is not an obstacle to that, but an opportunity: there is a near-consensus on the need for spending to protect our economy. The question is whether that spending will serve a greater purpose. Crucially, the issue is about not just money but power—to be legitimate and effective, levelling up must be done with and by us, not to us. We need much more flexibility over how we spend the funds allocated to us, but we also need a more fundamental doubling down on devolution.

We have done a lot in South Yorkshire, but we have done it with modest powers and resources. We are still the most centralised large developed country in the world. That must change, not just to unleash our potential but to help address the disillusionment and division that is growing across our country and that threatens to break it up. The polls showing a majority of Scots expressing support for leaving the Union are only the most alarming symptom of a wider crisis of faith also visible in the north. For all our sakes, we must make levelling up part of a more ambitious vision for reform—one that lets people feel that they are taking back control and that they have a country, a United Kingdom, that they can believe in.

We are now at a moment of crisis, but also a moment of opportunity. There is an overwhelming case for us to rise to this moment with ambition—not just to give the north the means and the powers to rejuvenate our economy and our society, but to do so as part of a wider vision for a more prosperous, more equitable, more democratic United Kingdom. In the process, perhaps we can make this a transformative moment not just for the north but for the whole country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. To allow everybody on the call list to speak, I am going to have to impose a three-minute limit on speeches.

9.43 am

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): What a pleasure it is to follow the thoughtful speech by the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). He does a fantastic job as the Mayor of South Yorkshire. We have a bit of history of working together to make sure that the area had the powers he mentioned. I am sure that he would want me to say that when he talks about South Yorkshire, and Mayors more widely, having a deal and investing money, that is a partnership of significant Government money and money that he will have raised locally. Of course, there was no devolution in England except in London until a Conservative Government were elected in 2010 with the sole desire of delivering a northern powerhouse of which devolution is such an important part.

I do not intend to talk about the challenges facing the northern economy because they have been well set out by the hon. Gentleman, but I do want to talk about two things briefly. The first is the hit that northern culture has taken from the covid crisis. Opera and ballet will be at the heart of the culture of many people who live in London and the south of England, but for many of us in the north it is our local football club—our Glyndebourne, Royal Ballet, Royal Opera House or Royal Shakespeare Company will be Blackburn Rovers, Accrington Stanley, Barrow, Carlisle or Sunderland.

There is an argument going on between the EFL and the Premier League at the moment, and the time has come for the Government to intervene to seek to unblock it and save local football clubs across the north of England, many of which are the cornerstone of our communities and at the heart of our culture. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that during the debate.

A bright point for the north is that many of us in this room have the privilege of representing constituencies that have a significant manufacturing base. It was our constituents who, during the covid crisis, put their shoulders to the wheel—there was no furlough for them. They went into factories to do shift work. People at Bark Engineering in Bacup made ventilators; people at Perspex in Darwen made the screens that we see all over the country in retail and office space.

It is our constituents who have worked so hard for the economy, doing hard jobs to make sure that we can trade through covid. We can see that from the September purchasing managers index stats, which showed that the north of England—every part of the north—was growing faster than London. That is a testament to the strength of our manufacturing base and the huge amount of work that our constituents have done.

We formed the northern research group to pay tribute to our constituents and look at important issues such as the Green Book, which we are going to dissect in very short order. We will also press the Minister and the Government on this issue. We need a northern economic recovery plan and recovery fund so that we can ensure, as a praetorian guard for the Prime Minister, that we are levelling up our communities across the north.

9.46 am

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this important debate.

Last year, the Prime Minister fought and won an election on the promise of uniting our country and levelling up left-behind towns such as Birkenhead. As is often the case with this failing Government, the reality falls short of the rhetoric. When areas of northern England were placed under tier 3 local restrictions in October, the Chancellor imposed a cut-price furlough payment of just 67% on the thousands of people who were unable to work; only when the Tory heartlands entered lockdown did he agree to step up furlough to 80%. The message was clear in the eyes of the Government: workers in the north were simply worth less than those in the south. They remain left behind.

The UK remains one of the most regionally unbalanced economies in the developed world. It has nothing to do with accents or geography. There was a conscious policy over 10 years of Conservative Governments to channel wealth to the south-east and sit back while the traditional centres of industry and employment in the north became ghost towns at worst and tourist attractions at best.

Rotherham, once famous for its steel, is starved of hope as the mills close and the jobs disappear. St Helens, which used to be famous for making glass, now has a glass museum with too few visitors. My constituency of Birkenhead is at the sharp end of regional disparity. I represent two of the most deprived council wards in England. Unemployment is above the national average and my constituency can expect far worse outcomes in

terms of job opportunities, income and even life expectancy than the people elsewhere in the country. Things do not need to be that way.

This week, the Labour party outlined our plans for the green economic recovery, which offers real hope to towns in the north of England. The proposals call for £30 billion in capital investment to create 400,000 high skilled, low-carbon jobs in just 18 months to provide vital support for UK manufacturing. The Trades Union Congress has estimated that £85 billion in capital spending on rail, social housing and green investment could create 1.2 million jobs in the next two years alone. The Chancellor should take note. To lead us out of the worst recession in living memory, the Government need to exploit historically low lending rates and invest in the high skill green jobs of the future.

Despite the Chancellor's promise of a green jobs revolution, the UK has committed only £5 billion to green stimulus projects since the pandemic began. In contrast, France has committed to spending €27 billion and Germany more than €36 billion, with countries as diverse as Italy, South Korea and Colombia putting sustainable developments at the heart of their recovery. The UK risks falling far behind.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. I call Damien Moore.

9.49 am

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I commend the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this debate. It is great to see the Minister in her place as well. This debate is important as we need to recognise that the pandemic is not only a health crisis, but an economic one. Nowhere has that been felt more than in the north. My constituency, like that of the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley), is also in the Liverpool city region and has felt the disruption of going into lockdown, then out of lockdown, then having additional restrictions—tier 3 with gyms, tier 3 without gyms—and now lockdown again. We need to get out of this lockdown and we need a tiering system that takes us out of it, but we need to know what the plan is.

There is no doubt that businesses in my constituency, and many others in the north, have suffered as a result of this disruption and uncertainty. They need our support now more than ever. That said, I wholeheartedly commend this Government for their world-beating furlough package, business grants and loans, reduced VAT, business rates relief and, of course, eat out to help out. That has been particularly important in my constituency, where one third of our businesses are in tourism and hospitality. That sector has probably had the most disruption, and the owners of these businesses just want to be able to trade again.

In Southport we have submitted a town deal. As with many other towns, particularly in the north, it is vital that we deliver on the £50 million proposed in that package to unleash £400 million for my constituency alone. Delivering on this would help other areas in the north, stimulating our economy and growing our businesses. That is only part of what is needed if all our constituencies are to prosper, because some do not have town deals. We need infrastructure projects to connect us better, to increase footfall and to increase business across our whole region. Better connected, we can work better together for a more prosperous future.

[*Damien Moore*]

We want the north to be given support that truly levels up, which is why I wholeheartedly back my right hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) in his call for a northern economic recovery plan. We cannot just hope our way out of this crisis and towards a better economic future; we have to plan for that, and we want to be part of that plan.

9.52 am

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I join all those who have thanked my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), and not just for securing the debate, but for the leadership he has shown on this agenda. We are all grateful to him for that.

Halifax was punching well above its weight as a northern Pennine town prior to the virus. We have aspiration by the bucketload in my home town. This is certainly a timely debate because, like other parts of the region represented here today, we were still recovering from the second devastating floods of the past five years when we had to immediately turn our attention to fighting the virus.

For some of us in this room, it seems like only yesterday we were here in Westminster Hall advocating on behalf of small and medium-sized enterprises in our constituencies. As I explained in that debate, Halifax has been in the equivalent to tier 2 restrictions since July—alongside our neighbours Batley and Spen and Bradford South, if I am not mistaken. We entered restrictions over 3 months ago, and we were about to enter tier 3 when the second national lockdown overtook us. I share that to make the point that although we have a great deal to offer, we have also faced a perfect storm of challenges, and we look to the Government to recognise that when considering devolution deals, economic support packages and their commitment to local authorities.

Turning to Calderdale Council, any levelling up in the north must start with properly funded services. The cost to the council of the pandemic and related lost income from closed facilities is expected to total around £37.2 million by year end. That has been partly offset by £22.2 million of additional Government funding, but that still leaves a potential deficit of £15 million for the council to deal with. Some of the losses associated with council tax and business rates can be carried forward, but we know that the cost will continue to rise as long as local and national restrictions are in effect.

Alongside investing in local authorities, sorting out rail in the north will be one of the best ways to connect, to stimulate our economies and to drive regeneration, and I have no doubt that others will say the same. We need it all: HS2, Northern Powerhouse Rail and the long overdue electrification of the Calder Valley line, which goes beyond these stations and connects Leeds and Manchester, two of the biggest cities in the north. In 2015, the north of England electrification taskforce recommended the full Calder Valley line as the top priority for economic and operational benefits, but we are still waiting for that to become a reality. I hope the Minister will pledge to work with colleagues to make that a focus of the Government's levelling-up agenda.

Those of us in this room would argue that we are the north's greatest advocates, but there is no greater advocate for levelling up the north than God's own newspaper, *The Yorkshire Post*. It does not hold back on holding the Government to account, which comes from its unwavering commitment to doing the right thing by its readers. It does need a little help, however, and I hope the Minister will reflect on that.

9.55 am

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford, and I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing the debate.

Walking around communities like ours, it is clear that businesses are struggling and are worried about the future where once, really not that long ago, they felt optimism. Furness's economy has thrived in the past, almost in spite of its infrastructure—our roads are terrible; our rail network, although improving, is a branch line and not fast with it. People live in Furness for the amazing community, and businesses stay there because of its deep pool of skills and knowledge—from advanced manufacturing to life sciences and green energy—but it is not hard to think that we are running with our shoelaces tied together. We are achieving not because of our environment, but in spite of it; we are achieving because of those people.

In some areas we are not achieving. There are wide and deep economic and health disparities between wards that neighbour each other. We have excellent teachers, doctors, nurses and public servants, but our geography—it takes two hours to get from Barrow to Carlisle—means that those same public services are stretched, and covid has only made those challenges worse.

This Government were elected to level up, and there has never been a more pressing time to do it. Let us be clear that we are not asking for handouts; we are asking to be put on a level footing, and to be given the chance to stand on our own two feet. If we want to tackle some of those economic and health disparities in our communities, we need to trust those communities. We need to use covid as an opportunity to open up and empower civil society to step in, to start focusing on families now and not when they hit crisis points. We need to focus on prevention and not cure.

Some villages in my constituency do not have broadband of any type. They often cannot get a phone signal, so let us level them up. Let us redouble efforts to get the infrastructure they need. Let us focus on the areas where we can meaningfully grow skills and recover. Cumbria is ideally placed to be the beating heart of a green industrial revolution. Let us think what an industrial strategy looks like and build on a base of offshore wind, nuclear and gas—and build towards hydrogen and tidal energy too. We have the skills, so enable us to do it. A northern economic recovery plan is what we need from the Government, for communities and constituencies across the north, so that we can build our way out of this pandemic.

9.57 am

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank and pay tribute to my friend and neighbour, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), for securing

this important debate. He has rightly made the case for better economic support for areas, such as ours, that have been hit hard by the covid-19 pandemic. Back in April, it was the former industrial towns that were predicted to be the most economically at risk. Indeed, Worsbrough in my constituency was given the unenviable title of tenth most at risk town in the country. The number of people claiming unemployment benefits in Barnsley East has doubled over the last six months and we need urgent help to get through the winter.

I will focus my remarks today on three simple asks. First, can the Minister outline the Government's exit plan for the national lockdown? Last minute announcements by social media and the press have left too many businesses in limbo and unable to plan beyond the next week. We need clarity now more than ever. Secondly, will the Government use the national lockdown to fix the broken track and trace system and give control to local authorities? Test and trace should be run by people who know their areas best. The biggest threat to economies in the north is the spread of the virus and we need to get control of it now. Lastly, will the Government close the gaps in the economic support package and provide clarity on what support local areas should expect if they have to stay in lockdown for longer? Too many Barnsley businesses have gone to the wall and too many workers have been made redundant while the Chancellor has changed his plans from one week to the next.

Barnsley, like many areas across the north, was under strict tier 3 restrictions when the national lockdown was announced. During the negotiations, the Government said that workers in the north would receive only 67% of their pre-crisis income—80% was apparently impossible. Now, however, when restrictions are put in place in the south, the Government have again changed their mind. Clearly, there is one rule for the north and another for the leafy Tory shires. Last week, alongside fellow Labour MPs, Yorkshire Mayors and council leaders, I signed a letter to the Chancellor. We said:

“People in the north are not worth 13% less than those in the rest of the country.”

I ask the Minister to clarify the Government's position.

The north of England is full of ex-industrial towns that have suffered, since pit closures, from a lack of investment, underemployment, a declining bus network and poor broadband performance. It is a simple fact that low-wage workers and those on insecure contracts are more at risk of becoming unemployed during recessions. The shutdown of pubs, restaurants and shops has had a devastating effect on the local economy in my area, where a large proportion of the population work in those sectors and rely on less secure and low-paid work. If levelling up is to become more than just a slogan, a genuine commitment will be required.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. You have been disciplined with your time, which has allowed me to relax the time for Back-Bench speeches to four minutes, for the time being.

10 am

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. Let me first address the key and core issue of the debate: the economy in the north of England. With or without covid, we are discussing a curate's egg of sorts. It is good and bad in parts, given

“the north of England” describes an area that is both vast and varied, encompassing seats as different as Richmond in Yorkshire—the seat of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, which is largely rural and wealthy—and my own seat of Leigh.

Although Leigh shares the designation of county constituency with the Chancellor's seat, it is largely urban and poor. Indeed, measuring it by the yardstick of the super output area, it falls in the top 20% of most deprived constituencies in the country. We struggle with the legacy issues of the mining industry, in economic and health terms. Infrastructure in my constituency has suffered from under-investment for decades, and the town centres of its communities are in dire need of regeneration, although I am happy to report that recently the town of Tyldesley received a £1.5 million grant to begin the process of regeneration, so there is hope.

The other difference, of course, is that the Chancellor's seat lies in historic Yorkshire, whereas Leigh lies in historic Lancashire, so we have one advantage at least. *[Laughter.]* All jokes aside, it is fair to say that in discussing the economy of the north of England we are discussing two economies—that of the wealthy part of the north of England, and that of the poor part. The contrast is often stark and visible. It is to the poor part of the north of England that we must devote our efforts, and in that I follow in the footsteps of my predecessor Richard Assheton Cross. He was the Member of Parliament for Leigh, and Home Secretary in the Government of Benjamin Disraeli, who first articulated the need to address these issues more than 170 years ago when he spoke of the country being divided into two nations.

Today I want to focus on infrastructure and the impact it has had on the economy of my constituency. Businesses are dissuaded from setting up in the town by a permanent snarl of heavy traffic. The associated economic and health costs resulting from poor air quality are significant. Air quality in some parts of the constituency is worse than that in central London. Since the mid-1960s, local residents and businesses have been campaigning for the completion of the Atherleigh Way bypass, to ease congestion, and for the reopening of the town's rail links to Liverpool and Manchester, so that we will have access to jobs in the two major cities that our town lies halfway between. With that investment, Leigh could be transformed from a poor post-industrial community into a wealthy commuter community.

I have faith in the Government's promise to invest in and level up the north, so that we can share in and help to build up the wealth of our nation. We must now deliver on the promises we made during the election.

10.4 am

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me in this important debate, Mr Efford. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on successfully applying for the debate and on the work he does as an advocate for the north. He has shown in his role as Mayor that devolution can be a powerful engine for real change in the north.

The Government talk a lot about levelling up. As we move on from covid, there is an opportunity for them to show whether they mean it. For too long, the north has been left behind when it comes to investment. The figures

[Tracy Brabin]

speak for themselves. The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently examined the five most recent years of data and found that capital investment per person in London averaged £1,461 per year over the five-year period, compared with an average of £851 across the rest of the UK. Investment in transport in London was £688 per person per year, which is 2.8 times higher than the average of £247 across the rest of the UK. If the Government wanted to level up the north, then take, for example, research and development—to do that today, they would need to give us £500 million to make us equal with the south.

We know that economic hardship is on its way, and the impact on West Yorkshire could be severe. The worst-case scenario estimates 58,000 jobs lost in the next year, leading to an unemployment rate of 14% and £12 billion wiped from the value of the regional economy. As someone who grew up on a council estate in Batley and on free school meals, I know the crushing frustration and boredom of poverty, and I know that children will be hyper-exposed to this downturn.

It is time for big thinking and bold ideas. Using our local leaders and local levers, there is an opportunity to transform the economic imbalance of our country. West Yorkshire already has the vibrant cities of Bradford and Leeds. They are already economic powerhouses, but with fairer investment they could deliver so much more.

It is a lucky day for the Minister, because the West Yorkshire combined authority has an economic plan to support our area out of covid-19. Ahead of the spending review, I urge the Minister please to look closely at those proposals, which call for £2 billion over the next five years to support the region's economic and transport recovery. This includes: a £194 million fund to support specific projects to tackle the climate emergency, fund new flood-alleviation schemes, create new jobs and help people gain the skills needed for those roles; £340 million to support aspiring entrepreneurs from all backgrounds to start their own businesses; funding to improve our transport network in an integrated plan for the north, as well as short and long-term funding for the region's bus network; devolution of adult skills funding and £465 million to support the range of measures designed to lower unemployment and increase opportunities.

It is ideas such as these, and more in the plan, that will, if backed by Westminster, help West Yorkshire to build back better. The north has great plans and ambitions for its own future. I support the argument from my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central that the time for tinkering is over: extend the local growth fund, implement the UK2070 Commission's recommendations, and invest in transport. We can level up—it is possible—we just need the Government to back us.

10.8 am

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), also a metro Mayor, for securing such a vital debate.

The levelling up of regions of the UK is a stated focus of the current Government, as has been said across this Chamber today. Coronavirus has become the first—and, I would imagine, the largest—hurdle to

this agenda for us all. At this first hurdle, the Government have fallen. They have given away the fact that, at their core, they do not value people and jobs equally.

In the spring, when the Government decided to lock down—lockdown 1—under pressure from the Opposition Benches, businesses and unions, they quickly drew up plans to provide 80% of wages through the furlough scheme for people who could no longer work. However, in October, when my constituents, and many others across the north, were plunged into tier 3, along with the Liverpool city region, it was decided that workers needed only 67% of their wages. The Chancellor told us that more money could not be found, but three weeks later—hey presto!—the Treasury suddenly uncovered more cash when we went into national lockdown. Now we are back to 80%, after a sustained campaign by many people—not only parliamentarians, but businesses and trade unions. What hope can we have of levelling up when, in the middle of an international crisis, the Government send the clear signal that northerners, northern livelihoods and northern businesses mean less?

As my Labour colleagues highlighted this week, we can harness the opportunities for green growth if the Government act urgently to deliver the economic recovery that the nation requires. That must include the plan that my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central eloquently put forward for levelling up growth, skills and investment in the north through the UK prosperity fund. We must also look at the Green Book reforms that have been much peddled and promised in the media. In my constituency, we also need more investment in hydrogen, which hon. Members from across the House have mentioned, and investment in Sci-Tech Daresbury, with which the former Minister, the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), is very familiar—he was helpful with it in the past. We need more investment with a laser-like focus to drive up prosperity and economic recovery.

We have had enough of second-rate public transport and hand-me-down rolling stock, the talk of levelling up while levelling down to rubble a multimillion-pound college in the Northwich part of my constituency, and the spin of “build, build, build” while the Government's housing algorithm means 28% fewer houses in the north and more than 160% more houses in London. Any investment in regional economies must be matched by investment in local decision making. We need to harness it as much as we harness the economic power that the north is capable of. The levelling up agenda must include a radical transfer of fiscal and political power. We lack not just funding and investment in the north, but the ability to shape our fortunes and make change ourselves. We cannot continue to tolerate inequality of power, which drives inequalities of prosperity across the country and the north, so I ask the Minister to consider—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order.

10.12 am

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): I thank my very near neighbour, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), for calling this important debate at a critical moment in our national story. The border between us is at one point marked by the River Dearne, where it swirls and pools into a beautiful lake in the grounds of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. I suspect that

fewer boundaries between two constituencies in this sceptred isle are more picturesque, although if you come to view it, Mr Efford, look from the south side towards the vista in the north, because the spires of Wakefield are a delight to behold.

In the 2019 general election campaign, the Conservative party pledged to level up parts of the United Kingdom that had long been left behind, such as Yorkshire. Disparities between the north and south have long been evident. In 2004, London's economy was the same size as the north's. This year, according to the think-tank Onward, London's economy is a quarter larger. Certain forms of spending occur disproportionately in London and the south-east, in comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom. One glaring example is travel. It is believed that it would cost £2 billion to bring per-person transport spending across England in line with London's. That highlights the shameful chasm that splits this country between the north and south.

In an excellent report, WPI Strategy's levelling-up index ranked the Wakefield constituency as a priority and 126th most in need of levelling up. More than any other report that I have seen thus far, it showed the extent to which, through successive Governments and failed policies—national and local, of all stripes—the north has been failed. In my constituency, financial deprivation is 27% higher than the English and Welsh average, and deprivation is 21% higher than the English average. From a commercial perspective, there are 33% more empty properties in Wakefield than the national average—evidence of the disproportionate effect that London-centric policies have on the overall economic environment.

It is promising that Her Majesty's Government have already pledged vast sums of money to tackle regional inequalities. A £5 billion package of new funding to overhaul bus and cycle links for every region outside London has been established. The pledge to create 10 new freeports is another key means to achieve the levelling-up agenda and provide a significant boost to the entire economy, with the first of the freeports expected to be opened in 2021.

The entire basis of Her Majesty's Government's approach to levelling up is through providing communities with the tools to achieve prosperity, not simply handouts. There is nothing more crucial to Conservatives than supporting people in achieving their ambitions. The investment that this Government have pledged to boost the number of viable apprenticeships is testimony to Conservative values.

I am greatly encouraged by the efforts of my parliamentary colleagues in helping to level up the north, and have been particularly heartened by the co-operation shown by neighbouring northern MPs from across the House. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central and I have been working together on opening a rail link between Barnsley and Wakefield, which will not only improve interconnectivity between northern hubs, but provide economic benefits for all of Yorkshire. I hope that more projects aimed at boosting the north will be championed and allowed to reach fruition.

Once we emerge from the coronavirus pandemic, it is vital that we utilise the opportunity of recovery to reset our economy. To achieve that, the Government need to ensure that their commitments to the levelling-up agenda are met, and that places such as my constituency are given the tools and the infrastructure to ensure their

prosperity. I am confident that I and my fellow parliamentary colleagues will hold the Government to account and ensure that they deliver on their promise to our constituents.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Before I call Judith Cummins, we have been joined by Mr Fletcher, so I am going to have to reimpose a 3-minute time limit.

10.16 am

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this extremely timely and important debate.

Even before the covid-19 crisis, the UK economy was fundamentally unbalanced. As the Institute for Public Policy Research North put it:

“The UK is more regionally divided than any comparable advanced economy.”

I have spoken before about the issues with the Green Book, and I continue to believe that the method used to assess potential projects skews investment, and therefore growth, into where it already happens, rather than where it needs to happen. The Treasury is committed to reviewing the Green Book, but I know that hon. Members will be interested to hear from the Minister the progress that it has made on that, because covid-19 makes it more urgent, given the disproportionate economic hit that the north has taken and the heavy price that people in the north are paying.

The Government's handling of the covid crisis, especially their approach to local restrictions and regional packages of financial support, has shown that the needs of the north are still too often an afterthought—or, worse, ignored altogether. Instead of establishing a clear, transparent framework of support, proportionate to need, the Government have employed a strategy of divide and rule. Local areas, most of them in the north, were forced into unfair negotiations on entering higher levels of restrictions, but were then told that there was no negotiating to be done on the level or share of the financial support offered.

Worse still, it appears that the substantial packages of support came only when restrictions were imposed on London. For example, on 22 October, the Chancellor announced new grants for businesses in tier 2. That came the day after London entered tier 2. Areas including Bradford had been under the equivalent of tier 2 for months and months. That is yet another example of the Government's having a deaf ear for the people of the north.

We are now in a national lockdown and the furlough scheme has been extended until March, but the Government need to set out exactly what will happen at the end of that period. They have suggested that we will go back into the tiered system, but many businesses in places such as Bradford will simply not survive if we go straight back into tier 2 or tier 3, with the current level of support.

In the short term the Government must ensure that, wherever there are restrictions after 2 December, there is a fair set of financial support packages, which take into account how long an area has been in local restrictions already. For each measure, the Government should

[*Judith Cummins*]

produce an impact assessment, region by region, which includes the impact on regional inequality and the regional economy.

In the longer term, we need a fundamental rebalancing of our economy. Levelling-up rhetoric and the odd project here and there will simply not be enough. Trust is in short supply and the people of the north will hold the Government to account for their promises and their actions.

10.19 am

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this important debate. So much has rightly been said about levelling up and the need to spread wealth and opportunity more fairly across the nation. Following the pandemic, during which the north has suffered disproportionately, there will be an even greater need to support our northern economy, so I welcome Sheffield city region's renewal action plan.

The plan identifies three key areas where support should be targeted—our people, our employers and our places. Our people certainly need support, with unemployment rising and the future job market uncertain. The key to attracting productive, high-skilled jobs is surely to ensure that we have a productive, highly skilled workforce. That is why I welcome the Prime Minister's lifetime skills guarantee. We also need to support our employers as they adapt to a new post-covid economy. I commend the Government for their ongoing support for businesses during the pandemic, and I welcome Sheffield city region's plans to help our employers adapt to digitisation. Of course, we must support our places, particularly the infrastructure that connects us. That is why I have submitted a bid to restore the Stocksbridge to Sheffield railway line and am working with local groups to improve rural bus services. Perhaps the Minister could provide an update of what the Government are doing specifically about northern transport.

Our people, our employers and our places all need support, but when we are thinking about our northern economy it is tempting to focus on what we lack—the jobs, productivity and opportunities that we do not have. If we are talking about investment into the north, perhaps instead we should start with what we do have. Investment is about finding an opportunity, spotting potential and catalysing growth by building on existing strengths. We certainly have a lot of strengths in the north. We have strong communities with healthy intergenerational ties. People are proud of where they live and value their relationships with families, friends and neighbours. We even talk to each other on the bus. I tried it on the tube; that did not go down well.

We can build on that strength of community to unlock economic potential. We have a proud history of manufacturing, which is a strength we should build upon. Just as in the north we were at the forefront of the first industrial revolution, we have the potential to lead the fourth industrial revolution—if we focus on growing our own talent, enabling tech investment and engaging with even the youngest children to inspire them to take part in our northern industrial future.

We also have world-class universities, whose expertise we can harness to invest in our local economy. I welcome the work that Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam universities are already doing in that area, but we need to think more about how the universities can reach into our more rural areas to foster talent in our towns and villages.

Yes, we have been left behind in the north; yes, we need financial support to level up our economy and opportunities, but let us also acknowledge what we do have, our significant capabilities, and look to invest in our strengths.

10.22 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on calling today's debate and showing what a difference a Labour Mayor can make.

Once a powerhouse in rail and confectionery, York's industrial past evolved into tourism, retail and hospitality—insecure, low-wage work with significant under-employment. Now our economy is in a perilous condition and is predicted to be the worst-hit place in the country. Already the high street has reached that place, with the loss of 55 retail outlets this year alone. The local enterprise partnership predicts that unemployment could rise to as much as 27% of the population.

The city itself, often mistaken as a place of affluence, has been identified as one of the most inequitable places in the country, with some of the poorest communities. When we hear the words “levelling up”, I have to say that after a decade I have not seen the evidence. If the Government believe that sites such as York Central, in the heart of my constituency, are places where they can just layer on more and more luxury flats, which people in my city cannot afford, they are missing the economic opportunity for York, North Yorkshire and the whole of the north.

The devastating consequences of covid-19 have shown that the resilience is not there, which is why today's debate is so important. There are five things and five demands: power, pounds, plans, places and people. For power, we need to see that shift in power, not just to devolved authorities. I call on the Mayor of South Yorkshire and the incoming Mayor of West Yorkshire to work with us in North Yorkshire, to ensure that Yorkshire has real power to lever in the change that we need to see. We need that power held in the north across Yorkshire, to make the difference.

With regard to pounds, we have already heard the call for money. We need real economic investment and clear, transparent data with a matrix to show how money is being invested and prioritised and bringing in the change that is needed. We need to ensure that when plans are laid, they are honoured. In the devolution plan for North Yorkshire, BioYorkshire is at the heart of the deal. We need to bring it forward now, and I ask the Minister to have words with the wider Treasury team and the Chancellor to ensure that we get that money now to invest in jobs.

When there is development, we need to prioritise places and spaces for our communities, and ultimately people. In Yorkshire, people are resourceful and resilient, but they are creative and aspirational, too. We need to ensure that when we put plans forward, they honour people's future and give them the opportunities that others have enjoyed for so long.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. I will put the question at 10.59 am, to allow time for the moment of remembrance. If the Front-Bench spokespersons take 10 minutes each, it will leave a short period for Mr Jarvis to wind up, in accordance with the convention. Before that, I call Nick Fletcher.

10.25 am

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing the debate. I have enjoyed working with him since becoming the MP for Don Valley, and I know how deeply he cares about ensuring that the north gets a good deal.

We have heard, and will continue to hear, Members discussing the need for the Government to offer sufficient support for the north as it is hit by the covid-19 pandemic. I wholeheartedly agree with that feeling, especially as I know full well the pain that businesses and individuals are going through in my constituency. However, I want to discuss the dire need for the Treasury to continue with its policy to reform the Green Book, as the Chancellor set out in March this year. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central has spoken at some length on that issue in the past. I believe there is scope for a true cross-party consensus on such a reform. After all, it is nothing short of a scandal that successive Governments' failure to reform the Green Book has led to a lack of infrastructure investment in the north for decades. That needs to change, especially as the north has been hit particularly hard by the pandemic. I therefore welcome the Chancellor's commitment to have the Green Book reviewed in March, although the pandemic and the pushing back of the Budget this autumn have inevitably delayed much-needed action in this area. However, I say to the Government: do not delay.

We are witnessing seismic shifts in our economy and its functions will be changed forever as a result of the pandemic. As such, the Government should be investigating ways in which they can create a more functional economy as part of their recovery plan, which has less of a focus on London and instead sees the potential of all regions in the UK. Areas such as Doncaster have considerable potential; the skills and workforce are all there. We now need ambitious infrastructure projects in order to truly level up the region.

Members will be aware that in March 2018, the then Government revised the Green Book to take greater consideration of environmental and distributional impacts of infrastructure funding. Of course, it was a step forward that had the potential to boost economic wellbeing in the north. However, I believe the Government should be even more ambitious. Treasury Ministers should now look at how they can completely rewrite the Green Book, so that the formula no longer rewards places that already enjoy good economic growth and high productivity with big investment projects.

The over-concentration on quick economic returns has only exacerbated the north/south divide and needs to be totally reworked; otherwise, the Green Book will continue to give the same answer to any infrastructure proposal in the north—"The computer says no." Equally, the current data on regional economic progress is not sufficient. Infrastructure spending could be made fairer by integrating into a new Green Book formula, data

that better shows regional capital investment—an improvement that hon. Members have called for in the past.

10.29 am

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. Congratulations to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing the debate. I have listened closely, and there have been a lot of passionate voices for the north of England, which is utterly fantastic to hear. On this occasion, there is much more that unites the Members present than divides them. I certainly wish them well in trying to get the Government to keep the promises that they have made and to go further in some instances, as Members have requested.

My biggest take from the debate is that I need to get my hands on *The Yorkshire Post* to see what all the fuss is about.

Holly Lynch: You could do with a subscription!

Stephen Flynn: We do not have *The Yorkshire Post* in Aberdeen at the moment, but I will put a call in with a local corner shop to see whether I can get it.

This debate has been wide-ranging and has focused on people's priorities: jobs, support and ensuring that they can live good lives. I will provide a little context as someone who also represents the north, but, as Member for Aberdeen South, it is the north-east of Scotland. The right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) mentioned that many of his constituents have continued to work throughout the pandemic, which is also true of many of my constituents. As everyone will be aware, the oil and gas industry cannot stop. If it did, we would all be in a bit of trouble—that is for sure—so my constituents have been working incredibly hard throughout the pandemic.

When the oil price plummeted, however—it absolutely crashed in early March and into April—the Government did not lift a finger. Not a single penny of sector-specific support was put behind an industry that has given more than £350 billion to the Treasury over decades. That was a disappointment not just to me, but to each and every person in Aberdeen who has a friend or family member whose job is intrinsically linked to the success of that sector.

Beyond that, we have not seen any Government investment in what comes next. We all know that oil and gas are depleting resources, but as far as I can see, there has so far been no firm commitment to hydrogen, which has been mentioned by several Members, or to carbon capture and underground storage, which is also of keen interest to Members in the north of England. The Government have not made those commitments, whether for the north of England or the north-east of Scotland. Quite frankly, that is not good enough.

The issues do not stop there. Although we are in the midst of this pandemic, we cannot escape the fact that we are just weeks away from the end of the transition period and, potentially, from leaving the European Union without a deal. My city is projected to be the hardest hit in the UK as a result of Brexit. Where is the mitigation from the Conservative Government? There has been none to date.

[Stephen Flynn]

Beyond that, in the last couple of weeks alone, my Aberdeen constituency has been the hardest hit in job vacancies—once again, across the entire UK—with a 75% decline. The issues in the north of England that have been spoken about are ones with which I sympathise, but they are not unique. Certainly, in the north-east of Scotland, we are bearing the brunt of the inaction of this Conservative Government, decades of inaction from UK Governments and insufficient investment in the future.

I am conscious of time, so I will bring my remarks to an end by reflecting on the wider situation in Scotland. As it stands, we have no clarity on the Scottish budget. Next year, we will have to rely on the UK Government telling us how much we will have before we can spend it on our vital public services. We have no clarity on what the shared prosperity fund will look like or whether Scotland will have additional borrowing powers.

On top of that complete and utter contempt for Scotland, the Internal Market Bill seeks to take back the devolved powers that we have. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central referred to the need for further devolution in the north of England. I commend him on those remarks and wish him good luck, but he needs to be wary of getting that devolution only for the UK Government to strip back the powers that they have given.

I appreciate that I have already said that I would make my final comment, but I have one more. [Laughter.] That is true of all of us in this House at times; repetition is something we are particularly good at. I will conclude by saying, once again, that I wish Members across the House well in their fight with the Government to get the investment that they need. Be mindful of the fact that Scotland also requires that investment, but where we differ is that we have a choice. We have another route to get what we want, which is for the people of Scotland to vote for independence.

10.35 am

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you chair the debate, Mr Efford; I am not saying that for brownie points. This is my first time speaking as the Opposition spokesperson, and my first time speaking in a Westminster Hall debate; I am not saying that because I want extra speaking time.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for showing leadership in bringing forward the debate; this is a really important time to talk about the issues facing the north. My hon. Friend mentioned how covid has massively affected the north—the unemployment numbers are much higher, and much more support needs to be given. I share those concerns and commend him for his leadership in helping individuals locally.

I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. All Members have shown so much passion for their constituencies, and I can see at first hand the challenges that they face on such a huge scale. It is good that we have been able to have deep, meaningful conversations without getting into any political point scoring.

I will mention those Members whose comments particularly touched me, although I will not be able to mention everybody. The right hon. Member for Rossendale

and Darwen (Jake Berry) talked about football clubs in his constituency and the need for a northern economic recovery fund. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) talked about the £15 million deficit that her council has. I echo her calls for infrastructure investment in rail—a point also made by the hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy). My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) spoke passionately about the challenges in her constituency and about extending the local growth fund, which is particularly important. My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) referred to the unemployment in his northern constituency and spoke powerfully about more investment in hydrogen. That point was echoed by a number of Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about the economic situation in York and called for transparent data, investment, modelling, infrastructure and a fresh economic plan. We need a shift towards economic investment. Rather than just maintaining current housing developments, we need to think about the future. The hon. Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) made a really strong case for his constituency, which encouraged me to visit it again. I have been there once, and I will definitely go again. He talked about the disparity between the north and the south, and how he is working collaboratively to try to address the issues.

It is crucial that attention is brought to this issue, because covid-19 will affect not just London but the whole country. We have to acknowledge that some parts of the country are suffering a lot more than others. We have already seen businesses close. I have seen the impact in my constituency and know from conversations how it has affected so many people across the country. The Government are failing to plug the gaps and address those issues—a point that a number of colleagues have echoed.

Businesses that have survived so far will struggle without extra support pumped in, and we need to think about that. We need to think about protecting local and regional economies. We need there to be local jobs, local businesses and strong economies. We need there to be local jobs, local businesses and strong local economies. That is not just so that people can earn a living and survive, but so that the different regions of the UK can thrive.

This is not just a Treasury issue, but a health issue, a tourism issue, a Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport issue and an environmental issue; it goes across Departments. We are facing one of the biggest challenges of our time, and we need to ensure that the north of England and all other regions that continue to be affected by covid-19 are fully supported.

As some of my colleagues mentioned, local authorities have been forced to negotiate the financial support that they will receive in tier 3. An example is the negotiations last month with Greater Manchester, which continued for 10 days—10 days when the Mayor of Greater Manchester was fighting for sufficient financial support for his constituents. Initially, the Government said to workers in Manchester that they would get only 67% of their pre-crisis income—67%. They said that 80% was impossible. Then, when the restrictions in the south were introduced this month, they changed their mind. Why was that?

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has yet to come clean on the phantom funding formula—I am still struggling to understand it—that he is using to determine funding for areas under tier 3 restrictions. What we really need is clear, consistent and fair funding for jobs and businesses, not to be playing poker with people's livelihoods, because people are suffering. They are really suffering and are expecting to see leadership from us so they can address the barriers they face.

I want to echo calls from hon. Members in this Chamber, such as that from my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), who talked about an exit plan for the national lockdown. That was echoed by other Members. The Chancellor needs to end the last-minute scramble to announce economic support measures and set out a proper plan for the next six months.

The Government need to fix test, trace and isolate, so that different parts of the UK can understand their local covid risk and find a way to recover. We need clarity—this has been echoed by a number of colleagues, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins)—on the economic support for local areas and what they can expect once lockdown finishes. The Government need to set out what they plan to do with regard to recovery, jobs and rebuilding businesses.

So many people have fallen through the gaps. Now the Government must step up, working across all parties and with local leaders, to ensure that those affected are supported. A number of people have talked about a green economy—something I support. Can the Minister confirm that the upcoming spending review will secure a green recovery across the country? The Labour party really wants to see a safety net that includes scrapping the five-week wait for universal credit, the two-child limit, the savings cap and the overall benefits cap. That would help to alleviate the financial hardship faced by many of those on the lowest incomes during this pandemic.

We need to see the Government stepping up to provide support for those who have been excluded from the start. There is still nothing beyond social security for those who have been excluded, and many of the self-employed remain cut out from social security if they have amassed small amounts of savings.

The support must be long-term and help different regions, including the north, to respond to their individual needs and support local growth. The Government must put in place changes to enable people who are off work to use the time to gain valuable skills for the future. That needs to be done urgently; we do not have time to just sit and have conversations about it. Rapid work needs to be done.

I appreciate that it will take years to rebuild crucial industries and identities if this support is not secured. The Government must act now and treat every region of the UK with the same respect for local people and local pride.

10.44 am

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on her first appearance as shadow Exchequer Secretary. That is a very interesting role and I wish her all the best in it. I also congratulate

the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing the debate and thank Members for their insightful contributions, many of which were delivered with great passion.

As was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), the north has been a hotbed of energy, ideas, innovation and creativity for centuries, and the region continues to power our economy. Global companies are taking advantage of the rich commercial opportunities in the north-west and the north-east is gaining a formidable reputation in areas such as advanced manufacturing, energy and the life sciences, while businesses in South Yorkshire, such as materials construction firm SIG and internet firm Plusnet, are generating jobs and growth. However, the Government are acutely aware that the past months have been incredibly difficult for people across the region, as they have been for the whole UK. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore) said, the pandemic is more than a health crisis; it is an economic crisis.

We are committed to protecting the livelihoods of people throughout the country. To that end, we have provided an unprecedented package of funding worth over £200 billion. I will briefly remind everyone of its main elements before addressing other points that Members have raised. The coronavirus job retention scheme has protected the livelihoods of 9.6 million people, many of them in the north. We have boosted welfare payments for the lowest earners and paid more than £1 billion to hundreds of thousands of people in the north through the self-employment income support scheme. That includes 63,000 grants issued in the north-east, 213,000 in the north-west and 163,000 in Yorkshire and the Humber—all to the self-employed. While thousands of northern firms have so far received £10.5 billion from the bounce back and coronavirus interruption loan schemes, we have provided in addition billions of pounds to local authorities throughout the country, including the north, to protect vital services during the pandemic.

These vast sums show that the Government are determined to help the whole country, including the north, through this difficult period. We will be using the forthcoming spending review to make sure we put the right financial support in place to continue the fight against covid. We will also be using the spending review to drive forward the vital infrastructure projects that will aid our economic recovery from the crisis and level up the whole UK.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (James Grundy) for giving me the opportunity to mention the towns fund. We are investing £3.6 billion in the towns fund to level up our regions and I am pleased that towns such as Tyldesley in his constituency are receiving this much-needed money.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) asked about the local growth fund. She will be aware that this is a matter for the impending spending review, and it would not be appropriate for me to pre-empt the outcome of that process.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) spoke about investment, and I would like to give a brief recap of our infrastructure investment so far. Over the next five years, we are going to plough more than £600 billion into capital spending. That means new roads, new railways, hospitals and schools.

[*Kemi Badenoch*]

We have brought forward £8.6 billion of this to support activity in the near term—plans that the International Monetary Fund said will address productivity, climate goals and regional inequality, which my hon. Friend is rightly concerned about.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) referred to northern transport and asked what, specifically, the Government are doing about that. In the last Budget, we announced more than £27 billion—a record investment—for strategic roads over the next five years. That includes £18 million to upgrade the A61 Westwood roundabout at Tankersley in her constituency, dualling the A66 across the Pennines and the A1 from Morpeth to Ellingham in the north-east, and upgrading the M60 Simister Island in Greater Manchester. In the last Budget, we also provided a £4.2 billion investment to eight city regions across the north, including Sheffield city region, for local transport in the five-year funding settlement starting in 2022-23.

The Government remain committed to investing in improving rail connections across the north. The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) will be pleased to know that we are developing an integrated rail plan so we can deliver High Speed 2 phase 2b and northern Powerhouse Rail more effectively alongside other transport schemes.

As well as such landmark projects, we need to improve infrastructure at a more local level, as the hon. Lady pointed out. To that end, this summer the Chancellor launched the £900 million Getting Building fund. The fund aims to boost jobs, upgrade infrastructure and support the recovery, and targets areas that are facing the biggest economic challenges because of the pandemic. I am pleased that combined authorities and local enterprise partnerships across the north of England have received more than £319 million.

As the hon. Member for Barnsley Central will know, Sheffield city region has already been awarded £33.6 million. That funding will create more than 1,000 jobs and unlock new housing, commercial and learning space. Projects include improvement work for schools and colleges, enterprise space for businesses and start-ups, new pedestrian and cycle bridges and junction improvement schemes, and new charge points for electric vehicles. That is far from an exhaustive list.

Our levelling-up agenda is not just about what or where we invest; it is about fundamentally shifting the way Government policy is formulated. The hon. Gentleman raised relocating civil servants to the north. As announced at Budget 2020, we are working with colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for International Trade and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to establish a new economic decision-making campus in the north of England to be operational by the end of this Parliament, with at least 750 roles at the new site.

We continue to build on our successful English devolution agenda. We intend to bring forward the devolution and local recovery White Paper, laying out our plans for partnering with places across the UK to build a sustainable economic recovery.

Rachael Maskell: I mentioned the BioYorkshire project in my speech; it will be transformative for my constituency. It will create 4,000 jobs and upskill 25,000 people. Will

the Minister look at bringing that money forward? We need investment now because of the economic crisis we face, rather than waiting two and a half years for devolution.

Kemi Badenoch: That is something we can certainly review. I will write to the hon. Lady to explain our position exactly.

Many core city regions in the north now have a metro Mayor and a devolution deal. We have recently agreed one such deal with West Yorkshire. It includes £1 billion of new investment and a directly elected metro Mayor, in place from May 2021. We fully implemented the Sheffield city region deal, which includes £900 million of new funding, along with substantial new devolved powers.

Many Members have expressed a desire for a northern recovery plan. This Government accelerated £8.6 billion for capital priorities to drive recovery across the country, and the upcoming spending review will continue to support the economic recovery of the north and the whole country. My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) raised the Green Book. We are planning to conclude the review and publish the updated Green Book at the spending review.

Several Opposition Members have insinuated that the south was given preferential treatment over the north. That is simply not true, as anyone can see, given the unprecedented support provided. They also completely ignore other measures, such as new testing technology being piloted in Liverpool city region, which could be a game changer in tackling both the health and economic impacts of the pandemic in that area.

We realise that these are profoundly challenging times for many people and many communities in the north. The Chancellor himself is a northern MP, who is very much aware and impacted by the issues raised today. I say to hon. Members and their constituents that he is very much on their side. As I have outlined, this Government are unwaveringly focused on ensuring that people and businesses in the region and throughout the country are not only able to weather the storm of covid-19, but also benefit from an even brighter future.

10.53 am

Dan Jarvis: I am acutely conscious that Members will want to observe the two-minute silence on Armistice Day, so I will be brief.

We have had a really constructive debate this morning. We have heard a range of articulate views from Members across the House. I think there is a clear consensus around the need to level up the north and to invest not just in our infrastructure, but in our people. I also think that there is a clear consensus that the time to do this is now.

The spending review in a couple of weeks' time will be a major test of the Government's commitment to level up the north. I hope that the Government take the opportunity to stop tinkering and start transforming. We in the north stand ready to be levelled up. Please do not let us down.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered support for the economy in the north of England.

10.54 am

Sitting suspended for the observation of a two-minute silence at Eleven o'clock.

Supported Accommodation: HMOs

11.3 am

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the conversion of family homes to houses in multiple occupation for supported accommodation.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Efford.

I want to make it clear that I have no problem with permitted development when it comes to individual homeowners adding a conservatory, a granny flat or an extra bedroom for an unexpected addition to their family, but I cannot believe that it was ever intended to allow developers to destroy existing family homes and create unregulated hostels, solely for profit.

I represent an area that is already plagued by developers adding extra rooms to family homes left, right and centre. Their actions have lowered the number of homes available for young families in the Selly Oak area and created properties that—once the student population for whom they were originally conceived makes greater use of the rapidly expanding supply of customised accommodation—will have a value only as unregulated hostels, which are more commonly described as supported or exempt accommodation. That is a real problem in my part of Birmingham and many other towns and cities across the country.

That destruction of family homes through conversions under permitted development is bad enough, but what consideration have the Government given to how the problem is likely to be exacerbated by their latest proposals to allow the addition of up to two extra storeys on dwelling houses and purpose-built detached flats? It seems like the perfect recipe for a rash of jerry-building on a scale previously unimaginable.

When I recently consulted my constituents about the Government's proposals for reforming our planning laws, 97% told me that they wanted more power to seek redress against developers who breach or ignore existing planning laws. They want a deterrent against rogue builders and developers who are destroying their communities. Some 93% also want a right of appeal against applications that have a significant impact on a local residential area and change of use applications that are likely to have a similar effect.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This is a very important issue. For me, the big issues are vulnerable people and supported accommodation. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that for something to be classified as supported accommodation, the support workers must be on the ground? Therefore, the buildings must be suitable and accessible, not simply to the vulnerable individual, but to their family and indeed the families residing in the area. There must be a point of contact to protect the vulnerable tenant and the local neighbours.

Steve McCabe: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman, and in fact I will touch on that point later in my speech.

My constituents want redress because they are fed up with seeing perfectly good family homes destroyed by those who insist on converting them with the sole intention of turning huge areas of Selly Oak into little more than dormitories. The first target for that activity

[*Steve McCabe*]

is students, who are a lucrative source of income as they are short-term tenants who are unlikely to make too many demands about repairs. As I said, students are increasingly being enticed to move to more modern, customised accommodation, leaving the owners saddled with large and unattractive houses in multiple occupation.

Unsurprisingly, those owners are looking for financial pickings elsewhere, and they have found them in what we tend to call supported or exempt accommodation. My experience is that most of that non-commissioned accommodation is anything but supportive. It has become a gold mine, enabling Government money to roll in for houses in which vulnerable people from a variety of backgrounds are packed in like sardines.

In theory, supported housing refers to any scheme in which housing and support services are provided jointly to help people live as independently as possible. The sector covers a range of accommodation types, including group homes, hostels, refuges and sheltered housing. Much of that accommodation is excellent, and the providers should be applauded, but supported housing can be provided by a wide variety of bodies, and not all are as reputable as we might hope. Exempt accommodation, as the name implies, can be provided by non-metropolitan councils, housing associations, registered charities and other bodies, and it is exempt from normal licensing requirements and checks.

Research undertaken by the Spring Housing Association, the Housing and Communities Research Group and Commonweal Housing examined non-commissioned exempt accommodation in Birmingham. It concluded that there are many thousands of individuals living in non-commissioned exempt accommodation environments that are potentially unsafe, unsuitable and not conducive to progression or growth.

One problem with exempt accommodation is that there appear to be no standards beyond the most basic. They are supposed to be buildings fit for human habitation with no hazards, and to comply with the relevant legislation regarding building maintenance and conditions. That means they can accommodate an extraordinary mix of tenants, including youngsters from the care system, people with mental health difficulties, those released from prison, and victims of domestic abuse and their children. Such people often find themselves living together in the same house.

It is not unusual to find more than one exempt property or unregulated hostel in the same street. Local residents are frequently on the receiving end of problems emanating from those unregulated hostels. Regular complaints include noise, drug use, antisocial behaviour and other unacceptable activities. Local residents are verbally assaulted if they dare to complain. My constituent witnessed a person being chased down the street by her exempt accommodation neighbour, who was wielding an iron bar.

On occasions where a property has been reported to the police or local authority, its ownership has mysteriously changed hands. The tenants are given no say over their choice of residence and frequently cannot identify the landlord—these are often desperate and vulnerable people. I was contacted by a young woman who had been advised that the property to which she had been referred was not suitable for couples with children. She was

several months pregnant at the time, but none the less found herself placed in a property in need of multiple repairs. When she complained to an employee of the supported housing group responsible for the property, she and her partner were threatened with a knife.

One establishment specialised in parties during the March lockdown. There was some difficulty in establishing who owned that property, but, again, it appeared that tenants had been placed there initially in the hands of one group, only for it to be replaced by another as the complaints mounted. In Gristhorpe Road, the landlords appealed against a notice for eviction by the local council because of repeated problems. The appeal was lost, but the notice has been ignored.

In another street, there are three properties side by side. Again, ownership is unclear, but there are reports of frequent drug dealing and antisocial behaviour. Just the other evening, I learned of a group of so-called paedophile hunters who turned up to deliver their vigilante justice at a property converted to bedsits for supported accommodation. The police are not consulted when a property is converted with the intention of providing exempt accommodation. They, like local residents, become aware of those residing there after problems emerge.

The research to which I referred earlier concluded that there is an accountability deficit with respect to this kind of accommodation and advised strengthening the criteria for housing benefit or universal credit rent paid to providers. It also suggests that new powers might be needed for the Regulator of Social Housing to address some of the problems.

A key issue in my area and many other parts of the country is the shortage of family homes, but I submit that the relaxation of planning laws envisaged in the current White Paper is the wrong prescription when it comes to increasing their supply. The combination of existing permitted development rules, new flexibilities and the continued disregard for planning laws is likely to only increase the problems caused by unregulated hostels.

A prevalent view in Government circles seems to be that delays in house building are a problem with the planning process. When it comes to houses, nine out of 10 planning applications receive fairly prompt approval, but approval does not equate to building. Government figures show that 2,564,000 units have received planning permission from local councils since 2009-10, but only 1.5 million homes that have received permission have been built. How do the Government account for the shortfall? Proposed changes will tip the planning process in favour of developers but ignore the problems faced by local communities. In many cases, it will result in a reduction, rather than an expansion, of much-needed family homes.

We need better regulations. We need a clearer definition of what constitutes adequate support in supported accommodation, and we need increased transparency when it comes to identifying the providers. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government needs to consider mandating the regulator of social housing, in order to develop a stronger framework for consumers and better protections across the exempt accommodation sector. Providers should be monitored regularly, and close attention paid to client-tenant feedback. I would also advocate that any property intended for use as supported accommodation should be subject to a background planning check, to ensure that it is safe and

suitable for such purposes and that there is no history of breaches of planning law or unapproved extensions or building work. We also need to be clear about who is responsible for managing and supervising such accommodation, and the owner should be subject to fit and proper person checks.

We need proposals to protect existing homes, not plans to ease their conversion to houses in multiple occupation or unregulated hostels. We need permitted development to be used to help people with family homes, not developers who are determined to destroy them. We need policies to encourage more affordable housing, not policies likely to reduce the supply. We need planning powers designed to support local communities and vulnerable people in need of housing, not measures that will undermine them.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for securing the debate; it has touched on issues that are of deep concern to me as a relatively new Minister in the post. I have taken a keen interest in how we can ensure that there is the right supply of supported housing for people who need it, and that the right oversight arrangements are in place to ensure that it delivers the best outcomes for such individuals. Those are priorities for the Government.

The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the concerns of his constituents around some of the challenges presented to them when faced with a large number of properties that they believe are managed incorrectly. It is shocking to hear the stories of some his constituents this year. As he touched on, supported housing is critical in providing vulnerable individuals with the support that they need to live as independently as possible. For some, it is a transitional arrangement whereby short-term accommodation provides them with support and equips them with the tools and skills that they need to move on, to live independently and to thrive in the community.

The Government are committed to ensuring high standards across all provisions of supported housing. That means delivering high-quality accommodation and support for residents, but also value for money for the taxpayer. We know that insufficient support and poor-quality accommodation leads to poor outcomes for individuals. That is unacceptable, and it fits with what the hon. Gentleman said. Although the vast majority of the sectors deliver high-quality provision and positive outcomes for individuals, I am aware of the issues surrounding poor-quality supported housing in some areas. I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern about supporting housing schemes in his constituency and others, where there are particular questions about the sufficiency and ownership of the support provided.

Such properties often house individuals with multiple complex needs who are extremely vulnerable. They may have experienced homelessness, rough sleeping, drug and alcohol dependency, involvement with the criminal justice system, poor mental health, or a combination of those factors. It is vital that they get the support they need to live and thrive independently.

The hon. Gentleman raised serious and valid issues—as did the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place—of which the Government are well aware. We are actively working to improve

quality and oversight across the whole supported housing sector to ensure that all schemes meet the high standards set by most providers to improve the homes that people live in, so that the support those people receive is tailored to their needs and schemes provide good value.

Supported housing schemes should be appropriately planned and placed in the right locations within communities. That helps to foster good relationships between local residents and residents of the supported housing. I understand that lack of planning can cause issues that are detrimental to the cohesion of the community, such as antisocial behaviour. Social landlords are required by the Regulator of Social Housing to work in partnership with other agencies to prevent and tackle antisocial behaviour in neighbourhoods where they own homes. Collaboration between local partners and the relevant powers, including the council, police and landlords, is essential for tackling and solving the problem of antisocial behaviour, but it is right that decisions are taken locally.

The vast majority of supported housing providers are legitimate, ethical landlords who provide high-quality accommodation and support to vulnerable people. Most supported housing providers are registered providers, which means that they are registered with and subject to regulation by the Regulator of Social Housing, including on governance, financial viability, quality and value for money. The Government also have regulations in place to oversee the safety and management of HMOs and to monitor their proliferation in certain areas.

Local authorities already have powers, through the planning system, to limit the number of HMOs—Birmingham City Council has already used an article 4 order to restrict the development of new HMOs across the whole city—ensuring that all such properties will now be consulted on locally and that the view of neighbours and local communities are taken into account in the decision-making process.

HMO licensing was extended on 1 October 2008 alongside the minimum size for bedrooms, which, for a single adult, must be a space greater than 6.51 square metres. Through the Housing and Planning Act 2016, we are determined to crack down on rogue landlords who cause misery to their tenants and put their health and safety at risk. We have put measures in place to make it easier for local authorities to tackle rogue landlords effectively by introducing civil penalties of up to £30,000 and rent payment orders for a wide range of offences. Banning orders and the database of rogue landlords are an important part of the package to help local authorities to tackle the worst offenders.

Although the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak raised undoubtedly serious issues, I cannot stress enough that they relate to only a very small part of the sector. Introducing over-hasty regulations to control that very small part of the sector may have unintended consequences for the rest of it, particularly smaller providers. Being regulated by a national body and the local council could prove to be far too onerous, and there could be consequences for much-needed supply if good providers exit the market. The Government are committed to ending rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament. Penalising good-quality providers, who make up the vast majority of the sector, could damage critical progress towards that aim.

The Government already have a programme of work in train on the regulation and oversight of supported housing, and it is right that we pursue that to thoroughly

[*Kelly Tolhurst*]

test ideas. My Department, which has been working jointly with the Department for Work and Pensions to drive improvements in oversight and regulation of supported housing, recently made two announcements on the progress of that work. First, we have published a national statement of expectations for supported housing, setting out the Government's vision for achieving the best quality accommodation to meet local needs. That emphasises the importance of strategic planning in understanding and managing local need for and supply of supported housing, and empowering local authorities to develop a sustainable longer term plan to meet the needs of residents. The national statement of expectations also mentions the need for community cohesion and proper engagement with residents. I strongly support that.

Steve McCabe: I understand the Minister's point about being concerned about over-hasty regulation, but as she progresses this work, will she look at whether there is a role for the Regulator of Social Housing in relation to exempt accommodation, and at the easy access that landlords have to Government funds for exempt accommodation? Those seem to be two difficulties at the moment.

Kelly Tolhurst: Absolutely. I will be looking at all the options that are available. There is a fine balancing act when it comes to decisions or regulations that we make. However, the hon. Gentleman will know of one of the pieces of work that we have already initiated—the £3.1 million of funding for five local authority areas to test approaches to improving quality and oversight in the housing sector. That will enable us to get data, evidence and best practice to test some of the work. That is ongoing but we hope that the pilots will influence some of it.

There are a number of objectives for the pilots. Undertaking inspection and enforcement work through a multidisciplinary team will drive up standards in accommodation and send a clear signal to providers about our intentions and expectations for supported housing schemes. Also, through a review of the care and support provided at the properties, again through the use of multidisciplinary teams, councils will ensure that people get the support that they need and is appropriate to them. I understand and take the hon. Gentleman's point about oversight of support and its quality.

Finally, in relation to the delivery of a comprehensive assessment of local need for and supply of supported housing, improved oversight of local provision will empower local areas and enable them to plan strategically to meet current and projected demand. I am pleased to say that, as I have outlined, the hon. Gentleman already has one of the schemes within his local authority, Birmingham City Council. We hope that that will drive up the quality of support, in addition to a focus on managing the antisocial behaviour aspect of supported housing in Birmingham. My officials are working closely with the council to monitor progress and provide support.

I absolutely share the hon. Gentleman's concerns about achieving the best outcomes for the individuals in question, and have taken on board issues that he has raised about the impact, particularly in his constituency. I thank him very much and look forward to engaging and working with him as we progress the measures within Government to improve quality and oversight. I am grateful to have had this debate today.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Family Visits in Health and Social Care Settings: Covid-19

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new call list system and to ensure that social distancing can be respected. Members should sanitise their microphones using the cleaning materials provided before they use them, and then place those materials in the bin. They should also respect the one-way system around the room. Members should speak only from the horseshoe, and they can speak only if they are on the call list—that applies even if debates are undersubscribed.

Members cannot join the debate if they are not on the list. Members are not expected to remain for the wind-up speeches. I remind hon. Members that there is less of an expectation that they stay for the next two speeches once they have spoken—that is to help manage attendance in the room. Members may wish to stay beyond their speech, but they should be aware that if there are lots of speakers, doing so might prevent Members in the seats in the Public Gallery from moving to the horseshoe.

2.31 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered family visit access in health and social care settings during the covid-19 outbreak.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. My main focus in speaking today is to highlight the need for improved patient advocacy and adult safeguarding via visitation rights for family members of working-age disabled adults in full-time residential care, including those admitted to hospital. Such patients often cannot speak for themselves and need additional access to family members who are able to advocate and communicate on their behalf.

I applied for the debate because of an awful situation of a mother in my constituency—a mother, much like me or any hon. Member present, who has had to endure a situation that I hope no mother has to face in the future. She is a teacher, a local community advocate, a single mother and someone who has tirelessly fought for her child's care needs. She was prevented from caring for her son, Jamie, and forced to abandon him to a care home that did not live up to its name. At 21 years old and with no visitors, he was left isolated, bewildered and depressed, often calling out in anguish, "I want my mum. I want my mum."

Jamie was a warm and affectionate young man who loved touch, kinaesthetic learning and being with people. His mother was denied access to her child, and I cannot begin to imagine what it must have felt like, knowing that her son was denied the care of his family for months—denied a hug, denied the comfort of a warm hand holding his, and denied dignity in his suffering. As a mother, my constituent felt powerless but sure that, had she been able to see him, she would have identified his decline and been able to intervene.

Underfed, Jamie wasted away, getting thinner and thinner in his confusion and isolation. Separated from those he loved and trusted, with multiple bedsores and

open wounds left untreated, he began to withdraw within himself and into a catatonic state of unresponsiveness—a young adult with complex disabilities and care needs, left to suffer in silence. By the time his mother was able to see him, it was too late. She reflected on the lack of status that she felt as a mother, which she felt was shared by many family members. It felt to her as though families are often seen as a nuisance or even a threat, and they are sidelined and ignored by some in adult care homes. This mother also felt strongly that some adult care homes do not embrace the care of the whole person.

Jamie entered full-time care at age 13. As a child in a care setting, it was wonderful. The care was holistic and helped support Jamie in every aspect of his daily life and learning. He thrived in that environment, but the change came when he moved into adult social care. Many adult care homes are excellent and highly skilled in supporting adults with complex disabilities, but others—it might be a very small minority—seem reluctant to work with families or to provide adequate levels of transparency and care. It is an ongoing problem, which existed well before the covid pandemic; that has only highlighted these issues.

Disallowing visits or video links that allow families to see and interact with patients takes away a level of scrutiny that makes those already vulnerable chronically so. Depriving vulnerable working-age disabled adults who have complex disabilities and needs, especially those who already struggle with communication, of the love and support of their families is inhumane and cruel. As a society, we lessen our dignity and humanity when we allow our loved ones to perish alone and to wither away and give up on life. Jamie had no voice, so I am here today to speak on his behalf, and on behalf of his mother and grandmother, to make sure that his story is remembered and that other deaths can be prevented this winter.

I welcome the Government's support for care homes and adult social care during the pandemic and I thank the Minister for reaching out to me the moment that I applied for this debate. She has been incredibly helpful and I thank her for her active participation in finding a solution and justice in Jamie's case. I thank the Government for their care home support package in March that announced £1.6 billion funding for local government and £1.3 billion to go to the NHS and social care. In April, a further £1.6 billion was announced for local government and for the adult social care action plan and, in September 2020, the Government published "Adult social care: our COVID-19 winter plan 2020 to 2021", which was shaped and recommended by the adult social care taskforce. The plan set out key elements of national support available for the social care sector for winter 2020; I welcome everything that was outlined in it.

Finally, I welcome the Government's announcement on visiting guidelines from 5 November. Allowing visitation is so important for patient care, advocacy, safeguarding and mental wellbeing, particularly for disabled vulnerable patients who may not be able to advocate for their own care needs. Allowing family members to visit could save many lives during the winter months and prevent other vulnerable disabled patients from being neglected, abused and left to suffer and die in silence, while restoring a level of compassion, empathy and humanity to patient care both in hospital and in the care home setting.

[Joy Morrissey]

Now that we are in the second lockdown I ask the Minister and others to consider what lessons we have learned from the excess deaths in care homes and from the adult safeguarding issues raised during the first lockdown. I understand that the main goal of the Department of Health and Social Care is to protect the NHS, particularly during the winter months, but we also need to save the lives of the vulnerable disabled by allowing each patient to have a family member with them as their advocate and carer. That would be aided by the improvement in mass testing in the coming months and the availability of personal protective equipment. This cohort needs a special exemption. A carer would allow for lives to be saved and, with mass testing and the arrival of a vaccine, that could help safeguard many other lives in the future.

If the NHS reaches capacity, as it often does in the peak winter months of January and February, another alternative would be for a family member or carer of the vulnerable patient to care for them directly in a home, a hospital or care home setting. A family member or loved one can also help with caring for the vulnerable person at home, further reducing the burden of care to the NHS. Many of these family members are able-bodied adults who are at a lower risk of developing serious health problems from covid-19 transmission. We also have to allow people to care for those they love.

I welcome the Government's announcement in the winter care plan that local authorities should work with social care services to reopen safely, especially day services and respite services. Reopening such day centres would allow families to manage a disabled loved one's care more effectively, while perhaps reducing the need for full-time residential care and lightening the burden on full-time carers who do not have access to vital daycare facilities. The Relatives and Residents Association, which is an advocacy group, reported that helpline callers had been concerned about the standard of care falling as already stretched services face staff shortages and burn-out. Stopping visits from family and friends restricts the ability for oversight and advocacy.

One of the callers to the association's helpline said that his wife

"starved herself to death. Her death was due to the pandemic but she did not die from the virus itself. It wasn't coronavirus—it was death due to a refusal to eat. She was isolated and alone."

Perhaps the Minister could provide clarity as to whether families are now permitted to remove their loved ones from residential care home settings, and what the protocol for that would be, moving forward.

Jamie's care home was in a neighbouring county, but his mother and grandmother lived in my constituency. Buckinghamshire County Council and the NHS are excellent and I worked extremely closely with them during the pandemic and the first lockdown to protect care homes and elderly residents, and to reduce the rate of transmission and death in care homes. I was proud of the work that we all did to protect the elderly in South Bucks.

However, the issue of working-age adults with complex disabilities in residential care facilities completely passed me by in the first lockdown, because many of my residents had additional needs and were at home. They

were reliant on day centres and respite care. That was the issue I was seeing, not the issue of the long-term residential care crisis.

I did not learn about Jamie's treatment during lockdown until the week before his death, when it was too late for me to help. That is why I am raising the matter now. This patient cohort cannot speak or advocate for their own care. They require extensive care and support from care home and hospital staff, and could run the greatest risk of being sidelined during a spike in hospital admissions, when staff resources are spread more thinly and they have to prioritise patient care.

Because these patients require the most care it is important that they have a family member who can be with them as their patient advocate and carer, to help ensure that they make it through these winter months. I welcome the Government's announcement of a vaccine and I know that, with the highlighting of safeguarding, we can get through these winter months, and that Jamie's memory will not be forgotten.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): It might be helpful to colleagues to know that I intend to call the Front Benchers by 3.30 pm at the very latest. I would like to ensure that all colleagues get to speak today.

2.42 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) for securing this debate on such a hugely important topic.

Throughout the pandemic I have received devastating correspondence from my constituents, as I imagine all Members have, regarding the inability to see their loved ones in care homes. Although the restrictions placed on care homes are for the protection of the most vulnerable and their carers, the loneliness and isolation that people feel, especially those with dementia, has increased due to covid-19 preventing them from seeing their family and friends.

Although more needs to be done for residents with dementia and other diseases, I welcome the guidance that was provided by the Government last week, which sets out plans on how our care home residents and their families can be reunited. For areas such as mine that have experienced heightened restrictions for more than three months, the measures will help tackle the mental health and wellbeing of care home residents and reunite families.

Prior to those tougher restrictions being imposed in July, the images of family members being able to see one another again were truly heartwarming. The joy in the faces of residents and their families will stay with me for a long time. To have that taken away seems not only heartbreaking but cruel. I truly sympathise with all families and care workers who have had to endure that hardship.

Some care homes in my constituency are extremely limited as to what contact between families they can provide, with either limited window space for window meetings or limited telephones to speak to family members. One care home, which I will not name, has only one phone for residents, and that frequently does not work or is not answered.

Along with all Members, I agree that we need to tackle this pandemic but we also need to be fair in tackling it. I fear that is one factor that we are forgetting. It is more important than ever to use technology to help mitigate some of those issues, but a lack of understanding of how to use technology, on the part of residents and even staff, has prevented it from being fully utilised. What is being done further to mitigate those issues?

There is no greater need than to spend time with one's loved ones. That need is even stronger for our most vulnerable and we must go further in addressing that need. The Government's announcement last week was a big step in the right direction, but we need to carry on our journey to tackle the issues of loneliness and mental health.

I will put on the record my thanks to all the care workers across Radcliffe, Prestwich and Whitefield for the immense work that they have undertaken during the pandemic, for the work that they continue to undertake, and for the hardship that they must endure in having to deal with the frustrations and heartbreak that they see on a daily basis.

2.45 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) for securing the debate and I congratulate her on her moving speech on Jamie's behalf. I lived in her constituency through my teens, and in fact I stood against her predecessor a long time ago. My mother is still one of her constituents. She is living very much independently, but maybe one day I will need to go to the hon. Member for help with my mother regarding the issue that we are debating today.

I will also place on the record my thanks to those working in the social care sector. Their courageous work during the pandemic, delivering quality care in horrendously difficult circumstances, has not gone unnoticed. The pandemic has been difficult for everyone, but for those residing in care homes, or for those with loved ones living in them, it has been nightmarish. Over 40% of covid-19 deaths have taken place in care homes—more than 26,000 deaths. The combination of fear and isolation, coupled with a dearth of familiar emotional support, is creating a mental health crisis in our care home settings.

Recently, I received this letter from a constituent:

“Dear Alex, my letter is concerning my bedbound 81-year-old mother, who is currently resident at a care home in Leeds North West. My mother, Patricia, has been a resident for many years. Along with many families, we had no contact with mum over the course of the pandemic, apart from a very short video, which lasted around a minute, sent when requested at desperation in the early months of the pandemic.

We requested that should a window room become available, could mum be moved, so we could at least visit her from a safe distance without entering the premises. Six weeks ago, a room did become available and we have been visiting mum at a window since. Today, however, I was contacted by the care home manager to inform me that we can no longer visit mum.

We are devastated that our family is being so cruelly torn apart. I thought that, as a strong woman, I would be able to deal with the mental impact, but it is destructive. Surely, there are humane options which can keep families together.”

I am thankful to the Minister and to the Government that guidance has now been released that says visiting through screens or windows is allowed, which is welcome

news for my constituent. However, for many residents with dementia or other cognitive impairments, the distress that would cause makes it untenable. Similarly, the British winter makes outdoor visits impractical for older and vulnerable visitors.

In addition, the cost of implementing measures that have been suggested to create environments that are safe from covid-19 are to be met by care providers. There is no commitment of additional money, excluding the infection control fund, to cover the costs associated with purchasing screens or visiting pods. Government shortcomings will doubtless result in convenient finger-pointing at individual care homes, which are unable to front the additional costs for safe visiting.

We also need to give family members the same rights as key workers, who are afforded regular access to testing and trained to wear personal protective equipment. The Government must know that that is the best way forward, as they promised a pilot scheme on those lines, but that was nearly a month ago and no date for the pilot has been forthcoming. I look forward to hearing the Minister say when we can expect to see that pilot begin.

The wellbeing of residents must be placed at the forefront of the Government's plans. That should include a recognition of the important role that social workers play in facilitating providers' and residents' decision making about visits. Social workers must be recognised as professional visitors, to ensure that residents' views and wishes are central to decision making about visits, and to support care providers to explore thoroughly rights and risks alongside all the other factors that must be considered in making bespoke visiting arrangements.

Practice is different across the care sector. Hospices such as the Sue Ryder Wheatfields Hospice in my constituency have given social workers access, unlike many care homes, which have denied them access. Social workers are mentioned briefly in the guidance issued for lockdown, which states:

“Social workers can assist with individual risk assessments, for visits, and can advise on decision-making where the person in question lacks capacity to make the decision themselves.”

But social workers do so much more, and are pivotal in promoting strengths-based human rights models of good practice. Social workers undertake a variety of statutory and non-statutory functions on behalf of public bodies. Recognition of the importance of safe access to care and health settings for social workers as professional visitors is essential. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on this matter.

Residents, staff and the families of those in care homes have been failed by this Government since the beginning of the pandemic. From woefully inadequate PPE—I had to deliver PPE myself to care settings—to inadequate testing, I am afraid that the social care sector has been treated with contempt. On top of a decade of underfunding, that has created a crisis within a crisis that is entirely of the Government's own making.

Beyond the pandemic, long-term reform of the social care system is urgently needed. But for now, at the very least families should be able to see their loved ones, so I urge the Minister for Care to press forward with the pilot, to ensure that it begins as quickly and safely as possible.

2.49 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair in this important debate, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) for securing it and for sharing the harrowing story of Jamie from her constituency. It will stay with every single person who heard it.

I will begin my remarks, as others have done, by sharing a passage from a letter from a constituent called Penny Hutchinson. Her mother, Yvonne, is living with dementia in a care home in Halifax. She said: "Imagine that you had not seen your mum for eight months because she has been locked away in isolation with no meaningful family contact. Then imagine the huge feeling of relief and elation as restrictions are lifted and the vulnerable are told they no longer need to shield. Now imagine the feeling of complete desolation when you discover that those freedoms and privileges don't apply to your mum and dad. Add to that the overwhelming feeling of guilt when you try to explain to your loved one why you can't come in to see her, hold her hand or give her a hug, and that there is no end in sight." I sent that letter on to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care because it said more than I could have done on her behalf.

Like Penny's mum, more than 70% of people living in care homes have a form of dementia. Visits from family members have a really important part to play in the cognitive state of those residents, but instead of being able to be close to loved ones at this anxious time, the best they can hope for is a socially distanced meeting behind plexiglass or outside in this weather. Although that is well intentioned, it can often cause confusion and distress.

Efforts to protect those who are older and clinically vulnerable by managing contact diligently will still of course have to be a priority in the coming weeks as we strive to avoid outbreaks in care homes and manage them where they have occurred. The Alzheimer's Society has been keen to make it clear that for those with dementia, limiting visits in that way can lead to their symptoms increasing and their condition deteriorating more rapidly, ultimately leading to premature death, so a rebalancing of those risks is required.

I want to put on the record my thanks to Calderdale's director of public health, Debs Harkins, who has worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic alongside her colleagues, including the director of adult services and wellbeing, Iain Baines. They have both met Penny and others to try to make progress.

Before I move on to the solutions, I want to point out that when I received a response to Penny's letter from the Minister's civil servants, it said: "The Government's guidance for visiting arrangements for care homes published on 22 July allows for local decision making based on the assessment of the director of public health and the care provider. Further details can be found at the gov.uk website by searching for 'visiting care homes during coronavirus'."

I followed that link, and at the time it stressed that:

"For local areas with a high local COVID alert level (high risk or very high risk)"—

Halifax has been in tier 2 equivalent restrictions since July—

"visiting should be limited to exceptional circumstances only",

such as end-of-life care. That gives no discretion for directors of public health, and puts them in an impossible position with family members desperate to see loved ones. Some clarity on decision making for visits would be incredibly welcome.

I imagine that everybody in this debate feels that the situation is far from acceptable—we have heard from many hon. Members already—so what would make a difference? I have been pleased to see news this week of mass testing, rapid testing and vaccines being developed at pace. We must ensure that residents of care homes, those working in care homes and designated family members are the first in line to access them as they become available. Treating designated family members as key workers would be a logical step. It would not overwhelm the system and would ease the distress of so many care home residents and their families.

We all know that social care workers have been among the many heroes of this crisis. They have carried themselves with dignity, honour and respect in the face of unimaginable pressures. However, as they tell us, not even they can provide full care to their residents without the support of family members. For those with dementia, family visits are not privileges or luxuries but a vital part of their care and treatment. Therefore, it seems appropriate to consider measures such as this—the shadow Minister has also been calling for it—which would ease the considerable pressures that social care workers have been placed under and the mental anguish faced by separated families. We must work together to reach a better settlement for care home staff, residents and their family members.

When this is all over, we will bring the economy back from the brink, but there will be some opportunities that we will never get again. Let us not regret not doing everything possible when we had the chance.

2.54 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I offer sincere thanks to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) for securing this vital debate.

It is clear that many MPs have been contacted by worried—often terrified—constituents whose parents, children, relatives or friends are in care homes. I for one have felt utterly heartbroken listening to some of them describing the fear and isolation that they know their loved ones are experiencing, and I, too, have an example—one of many. The mother of my constituent Steph is in a care home. Steph is one of five children and for a long time they have each spent hours on end with their mother. They lovingly held her hands, combed her hair, remembered stories together and reminisced about the past. They were not just visiting their mum; they were providing essential care.

Eight months on from the arrival of coronavirus, Steph still cannot touch her mum. People like her all over the country cannot hug their mothers or fathers, children, siblings or friends. They still cannot hold their hands to comfort or reassure them. All that they can do is watch their often rapid decline, for just half an hour at a time, from a distance—perhaps from a structure in a garden, or sometimes through a closed window, or maybe a screen if they are lucky. Like Steph's mum those vulnerable people are struggling to understand why their children and families cannot be with them.

An entire lifetime of love and closeness is ripped away from them and torn apart. For every person affected, every single passing day is a precious day lost.

Now, as winter approaches and, predictably, we are in the second wave, there are still no guidelines in place to protect loved ones from dying not only in loneliness and isolation, but from it. The Government like to talk up their ambition in many other areas. We have all heard of Operation Moonshot, Nightingale hospitals and world-beating apps, but there has been barely a whisper about allowing family carers to be with their loved ones. The announcement of a trial period was welcome, but for many people it created an even greater desperation, because they could not see any end in sight for the enforced separation.

Last week I co-ordinated a group of 40 MPs from across the House who wrote to the Secretary of State with a real plan. It would allow a designated family or friend carer to have the same key worker status as someone paid to work in a care home. They would have the same access to tests and PPE, and the same access to their loved ones. A number of groups have been calling for various measures of that kind for some time. They include the National Care Forum, Age UK, One Dementia Voice and the British Association of Social Workers. We are pleased to give them and the people they represent our full backing and a strong voice today.

I want to be clear: care workers have been magnificent throughout the pandemic, but the care that our families give is no less important for health and wellbeing. The cruel 30-minute time limit on visits must be scrapped, and care homes must have protection from legal action if covid is introduced to a home by a designated visitor. Those are the same protections that have been agreed for the NHS. Time is running out. With every day that passes, isolation, loneliness and deterioration grow for many of the most vulnerable in society, and friends and family carers experience more anguish. They pass another day of separation from their loved ones as they slip away faster, and more painfully, than they should.

It is often said that the true test of a country is how it treats its most vulnerable. For as long as the Government hold out and do not implement the plan I have described, they are failing that test, and failing the thousands of families who experience anguish every single precious day.

2.59 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) for securing this vital debate and opening it so well. I also want to join in with the calls of thanks to the staff across the social care sector who have worked so hard for residents across the country. I send my thoughts and best wishes to all the residents, and their families and friends.

East Sussex has the highest proportion of care homes in the south-east, and yet our county has the lowest covid rate. That suggests that our care homes have stood up to the challenge and done a great job, despite the enormous task that was in front of them.

The challenge before us now is as follows: keeping vulnerable people safe without taking away their right to live their years in dignity, and in the company of

family and friends. I have been helped by many residents across my constituency to put that dilemma into words. A contribution from Heathfield sums it up:

“In the care home where my partner resides, they allow two half-hour visiting slots a day. There are forty residents, that will give each resident one half-hour visit every ten days, even so it is still not enough. On each visit the loved one sits at one end of a room, the visitor at the opposite end and the carer in between... My partner’s mental health has remarkably deteriorated in the last few months, apathy and depression are more dominant on each visit. Every time we visit she seems more and more withdrawn and most likely feels abandoned by her loved ones because of the limited visiting.”

Last week, the Government issued revised guidance for visiting arrangements in care homes, to ensure safe access and visits by families and loved ones. The guidance proposed a range of options to create covid-19-secure care home environments and visits, including visits taking place outside and the installation of wall-to-ceiling screens.

I recognise that we have now liberated care home visits, compared with the last lockdown. I also recognise the dilemma for the Minister, because she has been a target for some. We try to do the right thing by residents, and yet here we are saying, “Open up!” If we do so, we need to protect the Minister—the onus, if we take more risk, is based on a cross-party decision.

I hope I am not overdramatising, but some of the measures read to me as more akin to a prison visit than a care home visit. They are also costly, in a system that is already financially constrained. Furthermore, the measures could be avoided with the introduction of testing for designated family and friends.

I want the Government to consider the following seven measures: regular testing for at least one designated family member and all visiting health professionals; the vaccine—when ready, as we hope it will be—to be prioritised for care home residents, and given to the designated family member and the staff of the care setting when given to the resident; a recognition that with testing and PPE, safe and closer contact can be permitted, and that we have learned from the devastating impact of the first lockdown; additional funding to support care providers to create covid-19-secure environments to enable members of the wider family to visit; national and local monitoring, and a reporting process for any blanket decision to ban visits; an acceptance that virtual technology, as good as it is, cannot replace human in-person interaction; and, finally, for providers at a local level actively to promote the safe visits.

This Friday, I will partake in my regular care home quiz with the residents at Ardath in Bexhill. Sadly, we cannot be physically together, but will join on Zoom. Our quiz master, the remarkable resident Georgie Farrow, always sets a tough challenge for me and brings laughter to the room. That residential care setting, like many others I visit, demonstrates the love, fun and spirit that can exist. It is vital that we do not lose that ethos while rightly seeking to keep residents safe.

We should not shy away from the real danger. In seeking to protect vulnerable residents, we might not only diminish their quality of life, but end up prematurely ending it altogether. The ingredients of love, care and protection, which loved ones deliver, are vital to keep vulnerable people alive and with a life. On that note, I very much hope that the Government and all of us, across parties, will work together as one to give more life into our care homes.

3.4 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) for securing this important debate.

One of the harshest features of the restrictions that we introduced many months ago to stop the spread of covid has been for our constituents not to be able to visit their loved ones in care homes. I have received—as I am sure has every colleague in this place—many letters expressing the real frustration and angst that they feel because of the restrictions that we have introduced. The updated guidance released last week is welcome, and it attempts to address some of the concerns, but we need to bring an element of humanity and empathy to the guidance. I know that many in this room, and our constituents, will feel that something has gone wrong over the last few months.

I want to talk briefly about a family in my constituency whose situation is very similar to those already raised by other Members. There is a young man whose family live in my Warrington South constituency, but his care home is in Greater Manchester. While we did not have any restrictions in Warrington, he was existing under restrictions in Greater Manchester, and different approaches were being taken. I tried many, many times to speak to the director of public health in Greater Manchester about the issues facing this family. I must say, it was a real nightmare to communicate across different county boundaries and to try to have a one-to-one conversation with someone from the care home and with the people regulating that care home.

The young man did not get to see his parents for about five months in total. That is simply wrong. Not only did the young man not get to see his mum and dad, but mum and dad did not get to see their son. I can only imagine how awful it would be, as a dad, not to see my son for that length of time. I think we do need to think again about the way we have interpreted some of these rules.

I want to recognise—we cannot forget it—how badly the first wave hit care homes. Therefore, everything I have just said is tempered against the fact that far too many elderly residents passed away as a result of covid-19. Some of the most awful conversations I have had in the past 12 months were with family members—daughters, sons, wives and husbands—who had lost a loved one in a care home.

At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, there were around 66,000 deaths of care home residents, and around 19,500 were covid-related. That means around 30% of all deaths in care homes were related to covid-19. Therefore, it is no surprise that we have had to put measures into place to try to protect residents in care homes, but they are not prisons; they are care homes—the clue is in the word “care”. Care is not just about protecting someone from a virus, but about ensuring that their mental health is maintained.

At the same time, we all know that being able to offer more visits will help everyone’s mental health and wellbeing. That is why we need to look further than the visits that are being carried out today. We need to be able to define the importance of the therapeutic impact that visits can have or, equally, how the suspension of visiting can damage the mental health of individuals and their families.

Dementia or Alzheimer’s disease was the most common pre-existing condition found among those people who sadly died as a result of covid-19 within care homes—around 50% of all deaths. For people who suffer with dementia, a lack of social contact not only is bad for their mental health, but has a significant impact on the progression of that dementia. This is a real priority for those who care for people suffering with dementia. Family and friends must play a significant role in the care of those people. Interpreting their needs and providing that personal care is incredibly important, but also very challenging in very difficult circumstances.

I welcome the announcement of a pilot scheme to enable informal carers to be given key worker status, and I am looking forward to the Minister giving us more details on that. The introduction of the lateral flow rapid tests for Warrington—10,000 being given to Warrington this week—is very welcome. I am encouraging the director of public health in Warrington to make sure that she is in touch with care homes, to ensure that those family members who need to get into care homes can get those frequent tests.

I will finish with a brief mention of a constituent who wrote to me earlier this week—a gentleman who, I think it is fair to say, is in his mature stage of life—to say that he had purchased a piece of technology and had installed it in a window in his wife’s care home. He told me that it was similar to the system used in a post office, with a microphone and a speaker, and it made a world of difference to him and his wife. He could now do a visit in complete safety, with no risk whatsoever. The window remains sealed, but he does not have to shout or practise sign language. He has been able to share his ideas with other people in the care home, and other visitors and relatives have taken on board his ideas and introduced them in other care homes.

I finish by paying tribute, and recording my thanks, to those who work in care homes in Warrington South. They have done an incredible job over the last 12 months. I also thank the members of the social care team in Warrington who look after elderly residents in their own homes by going into a home every day to ensure that they are well cared for.

There are many issues that we need to tackle for families and people in care, and I hope the Minister can take back to the Department some of the things that we have talked about today, so that it can come forward with some more ideas.

3.10 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I should say to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) that I was really moved by the way she opened the debate, particularly the way she described Jamie’s story. It will be imprinted on my mind and, I am sure, on the minds of all hon. Members present.

When things do not add up, I ask questions. During the first lockdown, I had to jump through hoops just to obtain data to find out what was actually happening in our care homes. I spoke to managers, the local authority, relatives, staff and whistleblowers, then I put the jigsaw together. In the vast majority of care homes, residents were kept safe, and I thank the staff for their extraordinary work and for the ends that they went to in order to care

for the residents. However, some care homes stood out. In the first period, around half of covid-related deaths in York were in care homes. Discharging patients into care homes—something I pleaded with the local authority not to do—seeded the infection. It then spread with the lack of PPE and no training in barrier nursing.

However, there was another conclusion to my inquiry: care homes became closed environments. One thing that we know about closed environments is that they are also unsafe. We have heard so many times in this place about the bitter experience of that. The plethora of informal inspectors were not there—GPs, community pharmacists and other professionals. They did not go in and see for themselves. Families did not go in either.

Families notice things. They notice if mum cannot reach a cup of tea, is looking unwell, has not eaten or is confused, and they notice if dad is slightly more unsteady on his feet, upset or withdrawn. But they were not there do that. However, one family noticed the eerie silence at one care home. Having been told that everything was fine, they learned that 15 people had died over a fortnight. They were not informed of the risk, only that the deaths had occurred. By the time it came to their deathbed visits, of course, it was all too late. During a deathbed visit to their mum, who had been fine, they found her emaciated, as if she had not eaten since their last visit in previous weeks. On another visit, they noticed that mum's mobile was uncharged. On another, she had a fractured pelvis on discharge. That is why visits must occur; if they do not, these things go unnoticed.

It was whistleblowers who informed me that, at one care home, people contracted covid but their death certificates with marked with their underlying health condition. Covid was not put on the death certificate, because there were fears of reputational damage to the care home. The staff's concerns were dismissed, and they were bullied. Even when the CQC came at my calling, they were shifted out of sight or moved to other shifts. Families would have noticed such issues.

Families must be proactively communicated with at all times and supplied with the information that they need to make care choices. As one relative said,

"We would have brought mum home had I known there was covid. It took her life."

I am sure we were all distressed to see a nurse who went to take her 97-year-old mum home being arrested for doing what any of us would do in those circumstances. Families must visit and must have the choice where care is provided.

A constituent wrote to me this week, having celebrated his 60th wedding anniversary in September. He and his wife are both in their 80s and were told they could not visit. He said:

"When your whole existence is dedicated to the love you have for one another, it tells you something is very wrong."

A distressed daughter told me this week that her father "couldn't visit mum". What are we doing to people? This is just so wrong. People are separated because our care system does not allow spouses to join their life partners unless they pay extortionate fees that they cannot afford.

I urge the Minister to look at that issue in the care sector. Not only must we give choice around visiting, but it must become a human right for older people. Visits can be facilitated with dedication and focus, PPE supply, and lateral flow testing to open up more

opportunities and create safe spaces. We need to ensure that indemnity insurance does not prohibit the care home sector from pursuing that.

On the vaccine, the most vulnerable and those wishing to visit them must be prioritised. We must also ensure that there are clear and easy routes for staff, residents and relatives to raise any concerns they may have. We all know that we need to look into the eyes of those we love—hold them, and know that they are safe.

3.16 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. This debate matters so much to so many people. Like colleagues, I have been touched by correspondence and have taken to heart so many of the difficult personal circumstances that my constituents have been through in recent months. I congratulate the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) on securing the debate, because I do not think that the issue has had enough attention in the House, especially with so much changing guidance over recent months.

We know the headline coronavirus figures because they are so stark: we are reaching 50,000 deaths in this country. Families are grieving loved ones, and people across the country are losing their livelihoods and facing hardship through no fault of their own. Let us remember that almost 30,000 of those deaths were excess care home deaths in the first wave of the pandemic, when residents of care homes were so tragically failed.

Behind the numbers, there are countless personal stories: families forced apart; special moments with loved ones missed; and the grief of losing family members. Visits to care homes and to health settings are just one of those sacrifices. Visits play a vital role—not just for families, but for ensuring the proper running of care homes and the protection of their residents. The first set of guidance, published on 2 April 2020, stated:

"Family and friends should be advised not to visit care homes, except next of kin in exceptional situations such as end of life".

In the summer, when restrictions were eased slightly, further guidance was issued for limited visits. The most recent and up-to-date guidance puts the ball in the court of care homes providers, families and local professionals to work together to ensure that visits are covid secure.

In reality, care home visits are a lottery. Relatives tell me that it is still proving difficult for them to secure consistent visits. That lottery means that one home in my constituency facilitates window and garden visits and arranges Facetime and Zoom calls. Another home had facilitated window visits when they were allowed, but found that residents were left upset and agitated as they did not understand why they could not see their family as normal, and Facetime and Zoom calls often led to more confusion and upset. That home now has a designated area so family members can visit during the winter, and has created an action plan to put that in place.

I want to share the words of one constituent, who has kept in touch with me throughout recent months as she has tried to visit her mother in a care home. She wrote to me this week to say:

"I was allowed in the care home on Thursday to see her, poor mum, its heartbreaking see her wither away to nothing. I was not allowed to hug or touch her, she kept getting up from the chair to

[Dan Carden]

come to me and I had to walk away and around the table, she was following me. Gut wrenching, all she wanted was her daughter, to feel safe, feel reassured and be with me.”

Of course, people have so many questions that need answering to ensure safe visits. As it stands, some visits are happening, but the practicalities and ability of some care homes means that visits are just not possible and too many families are still being left out. As colleagues will know, Liverpool is now piloting mass testing and I welcome the fact that Liverpool City Council is exploring how we can use the Mast lateral flow testing to support more direct visiting. I encourage the Minister to touch on that point.

Nothing can replace being able to visit a loved one in person, and nothing is more important to the people suffering the heartache of being separated from them week after week, month after month. I implore the Minister to do everything possible—I am sure she will—to ease that pain for my constituents and the millions across the country who have been affected for too long. There is no excuse for the inhumane treatment of care home residents in this country. Care homes need funding, PPE, testing and expert advice to set up safe visiting.

3.21 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am very glad to participate in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), who set out the importance of social and family contact for older and vulnerable adults. She made specific reference, in disturbing detail, to her own constituent in a way that sums up the difficulties that we face.

I have found this debate difficult. The issue before us, and certainly before the Minister, is very fraught—every choice in this situation brings its own serious challenges. I am conscious that these matters are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, but I speak in the spirit of common areas of concern about the issue. Specifically, how do we support the emotional and social needs of our older people while taking due cognisance of our need also to keep them safe? We have shared that goal today across the Chamber. I put on the record that those working in our care sector, I think we can all agree, do sterling work and deserve our thanks and recognition. I declare an interest: my sister Kathleen and my niece Chloe both work in the care sector.

Keeping older people safe and allowing them access to loved ones is something that every participant has highlighted. The balance is very difficult to strike, I think; we have heard about the tensions as we try to work through how we strike that balance correctly. I speak as one with some personal insight into the issue: my mother-in-law is in a care home in Saltcoats. She has dementia and lockdown has caused a dramatic and shocking decline in her condition. She has simply stopped eating. Her decline has been so great that I do not, in all honesty, believe that it can be reversed, or perhaps even halted, in her case; I accept that that may not apply to many people in her position, of whom I know there are many.

I have also heard from staff in several care homes that older people are suffering very badly from their lack of social interaction with other residents, their lack of contact with family and their missing out on the kinds of exchanges and conversations that could once have been taken for granted as a normal part of their day.

The lack of stimulation for many older people—it is horrible to say it—is akin to a slow death and is very upsetting. It is upsetting for the families of those who live in care homes and for the staff who work in them, who, throughout the pandemic, have coped with enormous challenges in a way that I hope they know we are very grateful for and of which they can be proud. Care home residents with dementia do not really know or understand why they cannot see their loved ones, which only adds to their distress and that of their relatives, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) illustrated for us.

Conversely, many people who have elderly parents in care homes are very keen and anxious that their elderly relatives should be kept as safe as is possible at this time, until there is a vaccine for the virus or it subsides. We need to be mindful that the average age of those dying from covid is 83 years old. That stark statistic reminds us of the kinds of choices that we are trying to balance.

We are now in a position whereby visits to care homes to see elderly relatives can resume—obviously, with strict measures in place to ensure that they are as safe as they can be. Residential care homes have made use of screens and windows, and outdoor and virtual visits. However, there is some concern among care home owners—we have heard a bit about this today—that they will face litigation over covid deaths as their insurance premiums soar in the midst of this pandemic. I think that, just as the NHS has some protection in that regard, so too must care homes.

We have all heard of the distress and loneliness, the destructive sense of isolation, that older people have felt, particularly but not exclusively in care homes, as they miss that very important contact with loved ones. A phone call or a Zoom connection is a substitute, but it is much less satisfactory in terms of emotional connection. There is no substitute for an isolated older person having a cup of tea while sitting in their favourite chair just across from a loved one, having a hug and seeing the smiling faces of their grandchildren. A virtual substitute can never replace that.

As our older people wait in a limbo of loneliness, missing loved ones, they do not know—we do not know—how long this limbo will last. That uncertainty is very distressing, because if someone is at the very advanced stages of life, their fear is that they will never again have close contact with their family. That awful prospect must leave people despairing.

In all this, we must not forget the staff in care homes. They dedicate their days to looking after our elderly relatives. They see every day how some of our older people are simply not coping with the restrictions, and it is very distressing for them; I am sure that it takes an emotional toll on them as well. They feel very keenly their duty to keep their charges safe and they, too, often feel torn and helpless, as so many of us feel in the face of this cruel pandemic.

The biggest fear as the pandemic rumbles on—turning our lives, as we knew them, upside down—is that we save our older people from covid only to lose them to despair. Most residents in care homes have dementia, and I fear that they are utterly bewildered and confused by the current situation. They cannot understand why they cannot mix freely with others, as they used to.

Expanding testing to include designated visitors to care homes—we have heard a bit about this today—as soon as capacity allows will, of course, be part of the

solution as we try to make inroads into this difficult situation. We also have the prospect of a vaccine, which we all hope will be available before too much longer. However, we need to continue to look for creative ways, such as that pointed out to us by the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), to navigate the road ahead. For as long as restrictions are in place, we need to find ways to combat the despair, distress and isolation of our older people, who feel very keenly this separation from loved ones.

Last week, Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport met again with families of people in care homes. Like all of us, she is acutely aware of the importance of visits for the health and wellbeing of care home residents and their families. Indeed, leaders of all parts of the UK are grappling with these very human issues in which lives are at stake and every choice they make needs to be very finely balanced and is fraught with potential danger. I am sure that these matters give those leaders and the Minister sleepless nights. I do not envy them their task. During these terrible times, a stark and difficult set of choices and decisions have to be made which could literally mean the difference between life and death. Across the UK, guidance for social care settings continues to be under review so all that can be done, will be done, to support safe visiting.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's views on these important matters and how she thinks we can better support our older people in care homes. There is a generation whose lives were blighted by war in their youth and are now blighted by this cruel virus in their old age. Of course, we need to protect them and look after them, but for many the cost of isolation from loved ones and of restrictions on stimulation, is very high, as they lose their sense of who they are and their dementia takes greater hold of their lives.

3.30 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) on securing this important debate and on her brilliantly powerful speech. I am particularly grateful that she focused on working-age adults with disabilities who have all too often been ignored in this debate so far.

Since mid-June, I have been calling for a way forward that will keep residents safe and get family visits going again. I will come on to that later, but I start by paying tribute to all those who have been working so hard to bring families back together: the local authorities that have championed face-to-face visits throughout lockdown, including Leeds, Sheffield and my own Leicester City Council, and the organisations that have campaigned on the issue, such as Age UK, the Alzheimer's Society, the National Care Forum, the Care and Support Alliance and the National Care Association.

In particular, I thank and pay tribute to Jenny Morrison and Diane Mayhew from Rights for Residents. After their own terrible experiences, they started their campaign to give a voice to all the other care home residents and families who have been prevented from seeing their loved ones since the first lockdown started more than eight months ago. They have had a phenomenal reaction to their campaign, and rightly so, because the issue really matters. It matters because of the anguish it causes

families to be separated from the people they love most and because of the increasing evidence that the physical and mental isolation that results from restricting family visits is causing serious harm to a large number of care home residents. In a recent survey by the Alzheimer's Society, 80% of care home managers said that lack of social contact is causing deterioration in the physical and mental health of residents with dementia. That is unacceptable.

All hon. Members present have spoken on behalf of constituents who have contacted them about the desperate agony they are going through and their real fears for their mums, dads, husbands and wives. I have also been contacted. A woman called Trudy got in touch to say,

"Today I've had to try to comfort my terminally ill mum in a video call, she's scared and she needs us. Not on a screen or behind a screen—but with us stroking her hand. It is destroying us that the end of her life is like this. It's destroying my family. I feel I am breaking every promise we ever made on looking after her."

My constituent John rightly asked me,

"What quality of life do residents have if they can't go anywhere, see any of their family and friends or have meaningful relationships? My family are absolutely distraught by the fact that we are not being allowed to see our family member but are having to hear them sobbing on the telephone and being told by staff how agitated they are and how 'lockdown' is affecting them and causing their condition to deteriorate. We can't get this time back with our family member and time is precious".

That point is really important, because the average length of stay in a care home for an older person is two years. After eight months of visitor restrictions and lockdown, there is simply not enough time for many of those living in care homes to wait and watch for a pilot scheme or another set of guidelines.

We need action now, because husbands, wives, sons and daughters are not just making social calls to their loved ones in care homes; they are playing a fundamental role in the everyday care of the person they love. Residents and their loved ones have human rights, both as individuals and as a community, and a ban on visiting arguably denies them those rights, as the Minister will know.

What should the Government do? I always hope to be practical in putting forward solutions. I and the 60 organisations that recently wrote an open letter to the Minister and the Secretary of State about this issue understand why the Government are so worried about the risk of covid-19 in care homes, given the catastrophic suffering and loss of life during the first wave of the pandemic, but the Minister will know that the Government's own independent scientific advisers, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, and its working group on social care said in evidence published on 21 September that the risk of family transmitting the virus from visitors to residents was low. Those 60 organisations, which include the Royal Society for Public Health, the British Geriatrics Society and the Social Care Institute for Excellence, which is responsible for promoting good-quality care, say that

"there is no evidence that a blanket ban on visiting, or near ban, is the right response. It is also the case that homes are much better equipped now to manage any risk. There is much greater knowledge of transmission and infection prevention and control practices than there was in March. Homes should be fully supported to enable visiting."

Opposition Members—indeed, Members on both sides of the House—agree, which is why Labour has been calling for families to get the regular testing and PPE

[Liz Kendall]

that they need since 17 June, when I first wrote to the Health Secretary warning about the impact of isolation on care home residents. I wrote again to the Health Secretary on 14 September, specifically calling for families to be designated as key workers, so that they can get the regular testing that they need to safely visit, alongside the regular testing of care home staff. That, as the Minister will know, is precisely the approach advocated by the 60 organisations that recently wrote the open letter.

The Government still have not really listened. Their latest guidance says that indoor care home visits will need floor-to-ceiling screens, which will keep residents and their families separated throughout. Alternatively, families can meet outside a care home window. I am afraid that that guidance fails on many levels. It fails to understand that it will not be possible for many care homes to put such screens in place. Even if they could, having a screen will not work for many residents, especially if they have Alzheimer's or dementia. That is before making the frankly obvious point that the winter weather and dark afternoons make outdoor visits very difficult indeed.

It is little wonder that the Alzheimer's Society says it is "devastated" by the new guidance. Its chief executive officer says that

"this attempt to protect people will kill them... The prison style screens the government proposes—with people speaking through phones—are frankly ridiculous when you consider someone with advanced dementia can often be bed-bound and struggling to speak."

Age UK agrees, saying:

"In practice we fear it will result in many care homes halting meaningful visiting altogether, because they will be unable to comply with the requirements laid down."

I know that the Minister will say that we are going to have a pilot to test families, but when will that pilot start and how long will it take? It has been eight months since lockdown began. Why has this not been a greater priority and why has more progress not been made? The bottom line is that a pilot is not good enough or quick enough. We need those visits now. Will the Minister finally agree to prioritise family members for testing, including with the new lateral flow tests that are being used to mass test people in Liverpool and students across the country?

I understand that those tests have low numbers of false negatives and can be turned around in 20 or 30 minutes, making them a good option for testing families with loved ones in care homes, as my director of social care in Leicester is calling for. I know that families, including my own, are desperate to get their children back from university for Christmas, but what about families who have not seen their loved ones for eight months? They want to know where they are in all the extra testing that is going on.

We all know this pandemic has had unimaginable consequences for care workers and for families and their loved ones. Care workers have made immense sacrifices to look after our loved ones, and they deserve not just our praise and admiration, but to be properly valued and paid. However, we have to understand that families are an integral part of the care system too. I believe you cannot have good-quality social care without the real involvement and active participation of families. People who have dementia lose their memory; their families are their memory, and the best possible quality

help and support cannot be given without families. I hope the Minister will listen to the concerns that I and other hon. Members have raised and I look forward to her response.

3.40 pm

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate and sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) for securing this debate. My thanks also go to all those who have come here today and made such powerful speeches, talking about the really difficult situation of visiting restrictions in care homes. My hon. Friend spoke extremely powerfully on behalf of Jamie, acting as his advocate in this tragic situation. I thank her for discussing this with me in advance of the debate; I am looking into that case.

As many hon. Members have said this afternoon, and as Minister for Care I strongly agree, visiting is incredibly important for those living in care homes. It is hard to put into words how paramount, how crucial, contact with their loved ones is for residents in care homes, but let me offer three reasons. First, for the individual in residential care, it can be what makes life worth living. The chance to see a loved one—a husband, wife, son, daughter, grandchildren or oldest friend—these visits are things to look forward to.

Secondly, visits to see their loved ones are important for family members. I have recently heard about a couple, both in their 90s; the wife is living in a care home and her husband always used to go to see her, but he has not been able to do so for months. This is actually affecting him more than it is his wife, who sadly has much less awareness of the situation due to her advanced dementia. It is affecting him because he is not able to see her. So the visits are important for the family who want to visit as well.

The third reason is the role that families and visitors play in making sure their loved one living in the care home is safe and well—the role they play in their care, in fact. Hon. Members have spoken today about the problem of residents, especially those with dementia, who are deteriorating without the visits they are used to. The advocacy role is also important, as my hon. Friend mentioned.

To step back a moment, the Government's overall aim is to keep people in care homes safe and well—as safe and well as possible in the extremely difficult circumstances of a pandemic of a virus that is so cruel in how it affects the old and most vulnerable. As the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said, it is an incredibly hard balance to strike, and I appreciate the way she spoke about that. On the one hand we want to enable visits to care homes, to enable people to have the things that make life worth living, but on the other hand, we know that when covid has got into care homes, when there have been outbreaks, it has been extremely hard for care homes to control it. That we have seen so many deaths of people in care homes is tragic. The hon. Lady is absolutely right; it is a cause of sleepless nights for me and others who are trying to make the right decisions.

In my remarks, I intend to speak first about what has happened, then say where we are now, and finally look ahead. I will do my best to pick up some of the questions and comments from colleagues.

When the pandemic hit us, it is true to say that visits were stopped, other than in exceptional circumstances such as end of life. The problem was so bad and there seemed to be such a risk for care homes that visits were stopped. During that period, I spoke to care workers who really went the extra mile to support care home residents through that time—to try to make their lives still worth living and to have positive moments, and to use technology to keep people in touch.

I am not naïve—I know that having a screen is not the answer to the problem of visiting, but for some people in some circumstances it has enabled more contact between those living in residential care and their families. It certainly does not work for everybody. It is not the whole answer.

That is one reason why, as covid rates came down during the summer, new guidance was published on 22 July to encourage the opening up of care homes and to enable more visiting. It supported local discretion; the director of public health and the local authority would work with care homes to agree a reasonable level of safe visiting, using PPE and social distancing and so on. I was very keen to see care homes opening again. Many people did have the chance to see their family members in care homes during that period. Unfortunately, not every care home managed to open its doors at that point and, as the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) mentioned, those in tier 2 or tier 3 high-risk areas still maintained strict restrictions on visiting.

As the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned, there is a real problem of closed environments. One of the things that visitors do is raise a concern if there is a situation in a care home. She and I have spoken about an issue in her constituency a while ago, which was of great concern. That is why, when we went into the current lockdown, I was determined that we should not return to the situation of the first lockdown, where care homes were closed. I was determined that we should continue what visiting we could safely allow, and continue to have the Care Quality Commission crossing the threshold of care homes to identify and investigate where concerns had been raised. That is why the current visiting guidance is to encourage care homes to enable covid-secure visits, using screens, windows, visiting pods and so on.

Some care homes have been incredibly creative and innovative. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) had a great example of a care home in his constituency. The guidance draws on methods that we have seen care homes using over the last few months, with the aim of getting others to follow suit. It is supported by being able to draw on the infection control fund. We have put £1.1 billion into funding to support care homes with the extra costs of providing covid-secure care.

I absolutely hear the message. This is not where we want to be. I want people to be able to hold hands again, hug again and have the physical contact we all need, which is particularly important for those with dementia and those for whom this whole situation is confusing or frightening. We know it has been bad for their health and wellbeing. Right now, however, to allow such contact goes strongly against the clinical advice I have received.

I have been advised that every single additional person going into a care home takes with them the risk of taking covid into that setting. In some parts of the

country, one in 40 people have covid. If there is a care home with 40 beds and each person has a visitor, one of those visitors may well be carrying covid into that care home, unbeknownst to them, because they may well have no symptoms. When it gets in, it can be extremely hard to control. That is why we have taken a cautious approach, but I absolutely want to open up care homes to allow for the kind of visiting that people want. I am looking ahead.

Hon. Members have asked about testing, which will be so helpful in reducing the risk that someone going into a care home is taking covid with them. We have a huge testing programme in place in care homes for staff and residents. Staff are tested weekly, and the vast majority of staff are now undergoing that. That is really valuable in catching covid outbreaks early. Residents are tested every 28 days, and the next step is testing for visitors. A trial will be launched this month in four local authorities in areas of lower prevalence, where the risk is lower. That will launch on 16 November in a range of 30 different care homes both to assess the practicalities of testing and to make sure that we are confident in its safety. That will trial both the polymerase chain reaction—PCR—test that has been used for some time and the newly introduced lateral flow test that can be turned around quickly.

Trialling both will enable us to see which is the best to enable visiting, and we then plan to roll that out more widely across the country in December to see how many visits testing will enable. I am optimistic that that, combined with the lower covid rates that our national self-discipline during the lockdown should achieve, will make it much more feasible to enable more testing. Looking ahead, the prospect of a vaccine that may be effective against covid, alongside testing and a supply of PPE, should put us in a much better position to achieve the level of visiting that we all want.

Dan Carden: Mass testing is taking place in Liverpool and many people are hopeful that that will allow for more visits to care homes in the weeks ahead. Will the Minister comment on what talks she has had with Liverpool about that?

Helen Whately: I am happy to do that, because I have been looking into that issue as well. The guidance I have been given is that Public Health England and those running the trial want it to take place first in the 30 care homes, which I mentioned. That will enable us to have confidence that those who have had a lateral flow test will be able to visit. There is sequencing to be done, but the issue is at the top of my mind. Lateral flows tests are already being used, and we should make the most of that to enable visiting. I hope to be able to put that more formally in writing in due course.

In the time available, I wish to pick up on a few of the other points that were made in the debate. The hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) referred to the 30-minute time limit. I believe that that must be something that the care home in question has chosen to put in place. Our guidance advises that one should book a visit with a care home, but does not stipulate a 30-minute limit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) set out an excellent list of things for me to take forward. Many of them are indeed in train,

[*Helen Whately*]

such as testing and work on the vaccine. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has proposed that care home staff and residents should be at the top of the list for that. He mentioned a reporting mechanism, which I am also taking forward.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) referred to the lottery of visits. On the one hand, we responded to local authorities and care homes when they asked for more discretion and a local say in how we respond to the pandemic; on the other, we can find that in one area there is far more access than in another, so we need to combine allowing local discretion with being able to investigate whether somewhere is not being so supportive of visits. We need to ask what is going on and how can we bring this about.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield focused on the situation of those of working age living in a residential care home. As she said, they have been talked about less during the pandemic than those of an older age, but the people of working age living in residential care are absolutely at the top my mind. As we have seen during the pandemic, those with learning disabilities might be at greater risk if they catch covid, and, like those of an older age with dementia, they need family visits and the support, love and advocacy of a family member.

As my hon. Friend also said, the pandemic has shone a light on some of the problems that existed in our social care system before the pandemic. Yes, the pandemic has been hard for social care, but there were problems before. Although the vast majority of care homes have provided wonderful supportive care—indeed, loving care—for those who live in their buildings, some have sadly let down those they care for. We must continue to identify, intervene and prevent cases where there is neglect or, worse, the abuse of those living in residential care.

We are in the thick of a pandemic that has made life so hard for those living and working in the social care sector. We have to step forward, get on the front foot

and really achieve the social care reform that everyone has been crying out for, for so long. This is an, “If not now, when?” moment. We will seize this moment not only to support social care through the pandemic, but to bring about a system of social care where we can hold our heads up high and be happy for the care of our loved ones, our friends and family, or indeed for ourselves, should the time come when we need it.

3.58 pm

Joy Morrissey: I thank the Minister for her kindness and humanity, and for how she and her Department reached out to me personally. That demonstrates her care and her compassion both for this subject and for those working age adults with complex needs and disabilities whose voices might not have been heard over the years. I appreciate her one-on-one attention and the engagement she has dedicated to the topic. I am incredibly grateful.

I want to highlight the excellent contributions of all hon. Members today. Although we come from different parties, we are united in wanting to highlight the needs of the most vulnerable and wanting to thank our care workers.

I also thank the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), for her incredible weighing up of the impossible situation that every Government, every Member of Parliament and every public health official finds themselves in. We did not even know what the devastating effects of the virus would be. It attacks the elderly and those who are already in care. We have the impossible situation of their mental wellbeing versus the actual preserving of life. No matter what party we are from and no matter our background, this is one of the most difficult challenges that any generation of politicians has ever had to face. I thank her for reminding us of the humanity involved.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

4 pm

Sitting suspended.

Future of the National Trust

[HANNAH BARDELL *in the Chair*]

4.2 pm

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): I would like to make Members aware that this is my first time chairing Westminster Hall. I am sure we will all get along well.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the National Trust.

Congratulations on your appointment, Ms Bardell; I am sure that we will give you no trouble.

This year is the National Trust's 125th anniversary year. I start by paying tribute to the founding visionaries, benefactors, members, volunteers and staff who have made it the great mediating institution that it certainly is.

For the entire eight years of planning and execution, I was the Prime Minister's point man for the United Kingdom's commemoration of the centenary of the great war. I was immersed in the sensitive handling and portrayal of history and narrative. I think we did well, and I take particular satisfaction in helping to shed light on the part played by people whose contributions had been overlooked for 100 years.

Today is Armistice Day, so I shall recall particularly a truly remarkable exemplar whom we ensured played a big part in the commemorations: Lieutenant Walter Tull. As it happens, his likely last resting place in a plot near Arras has recently been discovered. I mention him in the context of some of the difficult things that I want to touch upon in this short debate. I do not want to be either misconstrued or misrepresented.

In my constituency, we have one of the trust's principal possessions. Stourhead is about a mile from my home and we are frequent visitors, alongside tens of thousands, every normal year. Indeed, pre-covid, the trust had a membership that was gusting 6 million. It has eye-watering financial resources that would be the envy of most charities at this difficult time. It has international standing and an international reputation, and several countries actively seek to emulate it. So what is the problem?

The trust mission is clearly laid out in statute: to be clerk of works to a large wedge of our national treasures. There is evidence, however, that in recent years the trust—frustrated no doubt with that simple custodial function—has been interpreting its remit much more broadly. I submit that that requires scrutiny.

The key to the unhappiness expressed in recent times is contained within a collection of documents of varying status, some leaked, some published. The material, entitled "Towards a 10-year vision for place and experience", is a blueprint for a different National Trust from that envisaged in statute in 1907 and in subsequent National Trust Acts.

That document might have been convincingly dismissed as a think piece had it not been followed by a series of supporting "Reset" documents. Taken together with the recently announced round of redundancies and reduction in access to small sites, it amounts to a dramatic change in direction—one that has alarmed the trust's members, volunteers and workforce, and provoked a storm in the media.

Of particular concern is the proposed closure of smaller houses, I would say under the cover of covid-19. Those rather crudely referred to by the trust as treasure houses, including Stourhead, have always cross-subsidised those smaller properties. That has been the business model, which is commendable. We now find the properties that have been sustained by that model—for example, George Stephenson's house in Northumberland—are being closed. It could be that they are closed permanently.

We also find that it is not receipts, per se, that are the problem, because the outdoorsy attractions appear not to be in the crosshairs. Rather, the issue is with buildings, particularly what are referred to as mansions. The trust says it does not want to close or repurpose its sites, but has to cut its cloth because of covid-19. But look at its reserves, as well as its access to a huge volunteer workforce, together with furlough and other assistance given by Government during this crisis, and ask whether the trust, faced with the inflexibility of covenants and reserves, has approached either the Charity Commission or the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to see what statutory or non-statutory mechanisms there might be to assist in freeing up funds in these difficult times, in order to support its charitable purposes.

On top of that, we have a hobnailed boot of a document called, "Addressing our histories of colonialism and historic slavery", which is considered sufficiently off-piste to attract the interest of the Charity Commission as regulator.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and congratulate him on securing this important debate on the National Trust. On his point about the report, what is wrong with the National Trust researching the history of the buildings it looks after? Historic Royal Palaces has just advertised for a curator to uncover its links to the slave trade. Is he suggesting that that organisation should also be subject to this kind of witch hunt by the Charity Commission?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman ought also to look at English Heritage's 2013 publication on broadly the same subject. He may wish to compare the quality of that report with the National Trust's report and form his view as to whether it is appropriate to associate some of our national figures with slavery, as the title of this particular contribution does.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is legitimate for organisations to explore history and present material in a balanced, measured and considered way. The judgment we all have to make is whether the National Trust has achieved that. I suggest to him that, against the standards of other organisations, such as English Heritage, the National Trust has fallen well short in that respect. Indeed, any reasonable appraisal of the material would suggest to me and many others a corporate culture at odds with its membership. I would argue that it is also at odds in important respects with statute that underpins the National Trust.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this very important debate; I also join him in offering congratulations to our new Chair.

The National Trust obviously employs a vast number of people in the Lake district; the jobs of many of them are now at risk, which is deeply concerning. It also owns

[Tim Farron]

a huge amount of land and acts as landlord to dozens and dozens of important hill farmers, who are essential in maintaining the heritage of our landscape. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the National Trust should do everything it can to act as a landlord that encourages succession on those farms, rather than turning the buildings into second homes or holiday lets? Likewise, does he agree that it should encourage the Government to make sure that, in transitional terms, the payments coming into the farming industry from January onwards encourage the maintenance of the family farm and not a move to ranch-style farming?

Dr Murrison: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point; I feel sure that he is more expert on upland farming than I am. I would always encourage a landlord to be responsible, especially a big one, and in particular a massive one such as the National Trust. I would be distressed if it was tempted to sell off properties for them to be turned into second homes or holiday homes. That seems entirely the wrong thing for the National Trust to do, and I would argue that it is probably contrary to the 1907 legislation that founded it. The idea behind the National Trust is conservation, and it is difficult to see how selling off property in the way that he has just described would service that end.

Much of what we have had from the National Trust in recent times is entirely commensurate with the fears expressed by many that what it is doing, in its own terms and the terms of the leaked documents we have seen, is to “dial down” its role as what it calls a “major national cultural institution”. We see the corporate upper lip curling at an “outdated mansion experience” that is of interest only to what it calls a “niche audience”, which is apparently “dwindling”. It is a “niche audience” that was on the rise before lockdown and that is bigger even now than the population of the Republic of Ireland, but it is one that the trust’s clairvoyants anticipate will have moved on, as the trust seeks to

“flex its mansion offer to create more active, fun and useful experiences that our audiences will be looking for in the future.”

I have “fun” every time I go to a National Trust property—that is the whole point of going—and it is not clear to me what “useful” means, but we do learn that

“Everywhere...we will move away from a narrow focus on family and art history.”

This has been pejoratively described as the triumph of the “trendies” over the “tweedies”. What it means in practice is that professional curator posts will fall from 111 to 80. There will be a new curator and it will not surprise right hon. and hon. Members to learn that that curator will be called

“curator of repurposing historic houses”.

But out will go actual curators—those internationally renowned experts and scholars, who are specialists in one of the world’s greatest collections.

I suspect that most of the membership, like me and my family, flock to National Trust properties to admire an elegant pile of bricks or a beautiful landscape before going for a nice cup of tea and a slice of cake—job done, and happy days. It is leisure, it is breathing space, it is succour for the soul and a welcome break from the remorseless hectoring about this and that, to which, as citizens, we are subjected day in, day out.

There are those, particularly on the hard left and perhaps within the trust’s hierarchy, who will say that an organisation makes a political statement every time that it does not advance an opinion—that silence is violence. But the National Trust needs to be a politics-free space, a great mediating institution, and not an organ for promulgating a particular world view, whether one sympathises with that view or not. That, surely, is the service that it renders to civil society.

My parents liked to drag me and my brother around National Trust properties when we were younger. Fifty years on, they all merge into a perpetual search for ice cream, but I do have one abiding recollection, and it is not some politically correct right-on narrative, misspelt on a piece of slate. It is inequality. Those great houses stand as silent witness to an unequal past. We do not need to be force-fed that by the trust’s high command; it is there and it is in your face. It is also plain to most visitors that the wealth required to throw up those mini-palaces did not often come from a post office savings account. Some of that money was highly questionable—some of it very dirty indeed by today’s standards and even by the standards of the day. But here we are in 2020, with the public—on whose backs, to a greater or lesser degree, those palaces were built—possessing them. That is a triumph and a restitution.

I mentioned that I did not want to be misconstrued or misunderstood, and it is therefore with trepidation and in anticipation of a wall of hate mail and trolling that I come to the document—the trust’s slavery and colonialism report. It is a catalogue of its properties that have some links to those subjects, but much of it is flimsy and tendentious. In 2013, English Heritage published “Slavery and the British country house”, which is a serious, thoughtful, measured contribution to a subject of significant public interest, in contrast with the National Trust’s colonialism and slavery report, whose title, which conflates two things as a common evil, gives the game away. The conflation gets worse because, wittingly or not, it by association diminishes towering figures in British history, notably Winston Churchill. The trust speaks of context, but where is the context for a man who, more than any other, stood against fascism, racism and antisemitism? The best that could be said of that piece of work is that it is plain shoddy. Otherwise, we are left to conclude that it is indicative of the trust’s corporate mindset.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my confusion and that of lots of National Trust members about the fact that, only recently, the chair of the National Trust said that BLM is a

“human rights movement with no party political affiliations”,

when last month one of the leading lights in BLM, Lemara Francis, said that

“BLM is proud to be a political organisation”?

Dr Murrison: I think those words and facts speak for themselves. It is very important that those who associate themselves with a great institution such as the National Trust are very careful about what they say and the way they project themselves. They must not make themselves hostages to fortune, as I fear has happened in this case.

However, there is always hope. Faced with a wall of unhappiness, trust bosses have been back-peddalling, at least rhetorically, and that is very much to their credit.

We are told that the leaked “Towards a Ten-Year Vision” was an initial draft, despite no such caveat being present in the original. The director general was at pains to reassure me about that when she spoke to me yesterday, and I note that her op-ed in *The Daily Telegraph* today uses similar terms.

We have to take the trust’s leadership at its word. It seeks a “reset”—its word, unambiguously stated. We have a good idea now of what is in its mind and where it is taking us. Given the trust’s statutory underpinning, that is not to be undertaken lightly or without wider public cognisance, so let us commission an independent review like the recent Glover deep-dive into national parks. Thus fortified with a refreshed set of marching orders, the trust that we all love can then chart a course for the next 125 years.

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): I remind Members that there have had to be quite quick changeovers between debates. You have antibacterial wipes on your desks, so I ask that you do your best to clean the microphones in your areas before you leave and when you arrive as we fight covid-19. I would like to call the Minister by 4.22 pm.

4.18 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Thank you, Ms Bardell, for allowing me to contribute to this debate, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) for bringing it to the House.

The National Trust has done immense work over 125 years. In its own words, its mission is to cherish the “nation’s most significant cultural collection”.

It is, however, struggling. Covid has made that task harder, with falling membership and fewer visitors. Frankly, the membership has declining faith in the trust’s leadership, as evidenced at the recent virtual annual general meeting.

I wish the National Trust well. Its work is vital, but it really is not appropriate for a charitable organisation to become involved in politics. The chairman, in a recent letter to a member, chose to defend Black Lives Matter, describing it as a human rights organisation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) said. That is not a fair reflection of that organisation in its own words or by any routine or reasonable assessment. It is very dangerous for the National Trust to stray into that territory. It is not in line with its charitable purpose, as the Charity Commission made clear.

To remind hon. Members, the trust’s charitable purpose is

“to look after places of beauty”.

Beauty, because it is the exemplification of truth, is the most important thing to which we should all aspire. In beauty, we begin to have sight of the Lord. The National Trust is beginning to lose credibility, frankly, both with its membership and the public, because of misunderstandings about its purpose.

It is hard to know whether it was malign, naive, malevolent or just ignorant, but the defence by the trust’s chairman, Mr Tim Parker, was essentially that Black Lives Matter is not a party political movement and has no affiliations. That is a pretty thin defence if he is merely naive; surely he must know that political organisations are not all linked to parties.

Octavia Hill, who founded the trust and who came from Wisbech near my constituency in the Fens, said:

“We all want beauty... We all need space. Unless we have it, we cannot reach that sense of quiet in which whispers of better things come to us gently.”

The National Trust, whether gently or more loudly, needs to disassociate itself from some of the rather foolish things that some of its leading members have said. I hope that the Minister will tell us how much the review into colonial links cost, how many staff were involved, how much was budgeted, and how much public money was spent on it.

4.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): It is a genuine honour to serve under your maiden chairmanship, Ms Bardell. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) on securing the debate, and thank all those who have participated. No debate is complete without a quote from my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), so it was a pleasure to hear from him today.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire acknowledged, the National Trust is one of the largest and most respected heritage membership organisations in the world. It has more than 5.5 million members, welcomes nearly 27 million visitors to its sites each year, has around 9,500 staff and is supported by 65,000 volunteers. The trust’s first property was acquired in 1895 for £10 and is still open today, and from that, the trust has steadily grown. Today, it has 250,000 hectares of land, 780 miles of coastline and more than 300 historic houses and gardens.

Some 125 years later, the National Trust is still helping people to enjoy the country’s enormous wealth of heritage sites. The trust is, in so many ways, a hugely successful heritage organisation, but that does not mean that we should not ask serious questions about it or how it should be held accountable. As I am sure my right hon. Friend is aware, the National Trust is a creature of statute: it was formally created by the National Trust Act 1907, which has been amended several times since, and the organisation has evolved since Royal Assent.

The organisation’s vision is to preserve, “protect and care for places so people and nature can thrive.”

To deliver on that ambition, the trust is governed by a board of independent trustees. The chair is supported by a team of trustees who bring expertise to the running of the trust. It is also a registered charity and is therefore regulated by the Charity Commission, which is itself answerable to Parliament. The board must therefore ensure that its activities do not contravene or compromise the trust’s charitable objectives.

I set out those governance arrangements to make one point: the National Trust is an independent body. It is independent of the Government and does not receive any ongoing public funding for its work, and its activities are overseen by its board and the regulatory Charity Commission. Of course, as I have said, the trust is a creature of statute, so although the Government could, in theory, instigate a review into the trust’s operations, for which some have argued, we would not be able to implement changes in the way that some have suggested.

[Nigel Huddleston]

If the trust is found to have breached its charitable objectives, the Charity Commission, as the trust's regulator, would be a more effective body to police that.

That does not mean that the Government are not actively interested in what the trust does or how it goes about its business. I gently suggest, however, that tasking a Government commission to look into the trust to solve its complex problems is not a realistic idea. If there were an appetite for it—both in Parliament and in Government—the statute could be reviewed to consider whether it continues to provide a suitable legislative framework. I am sure right hon. and hon. Members will agree that that should be done only as a last resort, but it is an option. There are many other avenues of influence to effect change, including debates such as this one.

Parliamentary interest can be extremely influential, and I am sure the National Trust will be listening closely to the views expressed today, as I am sure are members of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, who will also reflect on what has been said.

Sir John Hayes: I understand the Minister's remarks about the Government's position, but surely asking the National Trust—at a time when it is laying off something like 1,300 staff—how much it has spent on the review, how many staff have been involved and what it has budgeted for a review of the link between 93 properties, including Chartwell, and colonialism is not an unreasonable question for a culture Minister to ask.

Nigel Huddleston: I do not think my right hon. Friend is understanding what I am saying. We do need to hold the trust to account and to ask it questions, but it is, after all, an independent body. We have many mechanism to do so—of course, we are doing so today. I assure right hon. and hon. Members that I will write to the National Trust. I will send it a transcript of the debate so that it can hear the strength of feeling expressed today and answer some of the questions raised. I repeat: it is an independent body, and we need to respect that.

Reports of the events at the National Trust's annual general meeting suggest that some of its members are not impressed with some of the trust's activities and direction. It was reported as being bombarded with complaints, with its members wanting it to focus on managing the beautiful houses and gardens, and not on the historical links to slavery and empire in its collection. The chief executive was reported as saying that the National Trust was still deciding how it will use information in the recent slavery report, and the Government will continue to take an interest in that.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has also made his views clear about the trust's review of the links to slavery and empire in its collection. On 22 September, he stated firmly that the National Trust should focus first and foremost on protecting and preserving our

heritage. He was right to highlight that as the trust's chief concern, and he rightly pointed out that neglecting it will understandably surprise and disappoint people.

I hear the calls for a review or commission on the National Trust. As I set out earlier, however, I am not convinced that a commission is the most effective way to bring about the sort of change that right hon. and hon. Members would like to see. Given the current state of play, I believe that the best approach is to rely on the good sense of the board and its executives to heed and respond to the voices of its members, its army of volunteers, the general public, the media, the Charity Commission as its regulator, and of course Parliament.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire is aware, the trust is losing approximately £200 million of its budgeted revenues for this year as a consequence of coronavirus. It is having to draw on its reserves, though it is also making use of Government assistance, such as the furlough scheme. However, it is important for us to bear in mind that 80% of the National Trust's funds are legally restricted, meaning they are not available to the trust to spend on running costs or redundancy.

The loss of funding has meant that, sadly, the National Trust has made 513 compulsory redundancies and 782 redundancies. As I understand it, the redundancies protect as far as possible the conservation and curatorial functions of the trust, and it has stressed that the changes do not alter its mission. I also understand that there are no plans to permanently close any of its properties. My right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire mentioned that he has heard otherwise, so I will seek clarity on that point.

For the reasons that I have set out, I believe the National Trust is a success story. One hundred and twenty-five years on from its foundation, it continues to serve the country by preserving the United Kingdom's rich tapestry of heritage sites and buildings for the public to enjoy. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire has argued, however, its future must be a focus, and it must focus on its core functions: to curate and preserve historic houses, gardens and landscapes for everyone to enjoy.

Although I completely understand the intent behind the National Trust's decision to undertake a review of its historic houses, especially in this time of heightened awareness of discrimination, I think the National Trust will feel that the way that it was done was unfortunate. I accept that the trust did not intend to cause offence, but we must acknowledge that, for many people, it did cause offence. The trust must reflect on that and learn from it.

For over a century, the trust has focused on preserving and curating our great historic houses, gardens and landscapes for the nation. That is what it should focus on during the next century, too.

Question put and agreed to.

4.30 pm

Sitting suspended.

Pat Finucane

4.32 pm

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Order. I draw Members' attention to the antibacterial wipes on their desk and ask that they clean their microphones and work area as they arrive and leave and dispose of those wipes in the bin on their way out. Our cleaners do an excellent job, but let us make it as easy as possible for them.

I would also like to read a statement before we begin the debate. Before I call the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), I should advise hon. Members that the judicial review currently before the High Court is not sub judice, because it relates to a ministerial decision. There are several other historical Northern Ireland cases which have active legal proceedings and are, therefore, sub judice. Reference should not be made to those proceedings in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Foyle for his courtesy in consulting the Table Office in advance of his debate, and I remind any other Member participating in this debate to be equally mindful of the sub judice resolution in matters still before the courts.

4.33 pm

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a public inquiry into the death of Pat Finucane.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell.

I want at the outset to recognise Geraldine Finucane and her family. I also want to recognise John Finucane, who is a Member of this House. That family have been put through the wringer for decades. They make it clear that they do not believe that this murder is any more special or deserving of truth and justice than another, but there is a particular point about Pat Finucane's murder that goes right to the heart of the British involvement in Northern Ireland. Let us just take a moment to remember, in all the conversation, debate and politics around the issue, what actually happened to Pat Finucane, a human rights solicitor from Belfast.

On 12 February 1989 Pat was with his wife and three children having dinner one Sunday afternoon. Loyalist paramilitaries used a sledgehammer to beat his front door in. They went to the kitchen and they murdered him. They shot him with 14 bullets, in front of his children. Mr Finucane's now adult son Michael said that the image of the attack is

"seared into my mind. The thing I remember most vividly is the noise; the reports of each bullet reverberating in the kitchen, how my grip on my younger brother and sister tightened with every shot."

What happened on that night? Here is what we know. Brian Nelson was a force research unit agent linked to the Ulster Defence Association—an agent of an organ of the British Army, which, of course, told John Stevens when he investigated this case and others that it never had any agents in Northern Ireland. We now know irrefutably that that was total and utter balderdash.

We know that two gunmen entered that house and murdered Pat Finucane. We know that one of them, Ken Barrett, was a Royal Ulster Constabulary agent, and that William Stobie, who supplied the gun, was also an RUC agent. So three agents of the British state were involved in the fingering of Pat Finucane, the planning of his murder, the supplying of the gun and the pulling of the trigger.

We also know that David Cameron, the former British Prime Minister, said that there were "shocking levels of...collusion" involved in what happened to Pat Finucane. We know that the offices of Lord Stevens, an eminent former police officer in this country, were firebombed when he investigated the case—I wonder who did that. He also said as recently as last year that the state held back oceans of information on Pat Finucane's case.

A few weeks before Pat's murder, Minister Douglas Hogg stated in the House of Commons that a number of lawyers in Northern Ireland were "unduly sympathetic to the IRA".

What did they expect to happen after that statement?

We know that in 2001, at the Weston Park negotiations, the two Governments—the Irish and British Governments—and all the political parties in Northern Ireland agreed to set up a number of public inquiries. The British Government prevaricated. In 2004, Judge Cory recommended that there was sufficient evidence in the case of Pat Finucane to allow a public inquiry, because of the "sufficient evidence of collusion" that he found. All the other inquiries that he recommended have happened and have reported, apart from this one; this is the only one outstanding.

Over an 18-month period in 2010-11, the family were in long conversation with the British Government and Downing Street. The conversation was not about whether there should be a public inquiry, but about the nature of that public inquiry. We then had the de Silva review and, more recently, the Supreme Court ruling that the British Government had not delivered their international obligation to have an article 2 compliant investigation.

There is absolute clarity that there were "shocking levels" of collusion, in David Cameron's words. Let us think for a second about what that means. It means that a previous British Government murdered a human rights lawyer in Belfast in front of his family and that they have denied every single opportunity to give the family what they absolutely deserve, which is the full truth in the matter.

It would take a long time for anybody in this Chamber to convince me of the righteousness of the British Government, the British state or the British Army. But British MPs should ask themselves a simple question: "What would you do?" What would the Minister do if he had a family in his constituency whose father was murdered in front of their eyes for no crime other than being a human rights lawyer?

I believe in a different kind of constitutional settlement for Northern Ireland, but I recognise the reality that the British Government have jurisdiction in Northern Ireland as it stands. The British Government have a responsibility to the citizens of Northern Ireland. They have a responsibility not to murder them. They have a responsibility not to cover up their murder and they have a responsibility to do everything in their power to get to the truth of what happens when something like that is done.

I have very little faith that this British Government will do the right thing in this case. They absolutely should, but this is the same British Government, of course, that put out a statement on 18 March, moving themselves as far away as possible from the Stormont House agreement—another international agreement that they are prepared to break, it seems. They are seemingly prepared to sacrifice victims at the altar of political expediency, to throw some red meat to the Back Benches

[Colum Eastwood]

of the Tory party, and to abandon the opportunity for all of the victims of our terrible conflict to have the full truth of what happened.

In my view, there is no chance whatsoever for my community to move forward in the spirit of reconciliation unless we get to the full truth of what happened during the conflict. I implore the Government, once and for all, to live up to their commitments in Weston Park, to live up to the promises that were made to Pat Finucane's family and to live up to the needs of the community of Northern Ireland, who need to be able to move forward.

We do not want to live in the past anymore. We want to move forward, but we have to do that on the basis of truth, justice and democracy. It cannot be held back any longer.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Order. A number of people wish to speak. If Members keep their contributions to five minutes, I will be able to bring in the shadow Minister at 5.15 pm and the Minister at 5.20 pm, with—I hope—time for Mr Eastwood to sum up at the end.

4.41 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is an unusually great pleasure to be able to serve under your chairship, in your first outing as Chair here in Westminster Hall, Ms Bardell. It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and to belatedly welcome him and his party back to the House of Commons. In the last Parliament, there was a missing piece in the parliamentary puzzle, which meant we did not see the whole picture when it came to Northern Ireland politics. It is very important that the nationalist viewpoint in Northern Ireland is represented here in this House.

Given my own family background, I have taken an interest over many years in the politics of Ireland and Northern Ireland. I have visited Belfast on many occasions during my parliamentary career. When I went there, I was always struck by the similarity between the cities of Belfast and Cardiff, which I represent—in their architecture, in their size and in the warm welcome of the citizens of those two cities.

In drawing on that comparison, I have to ask whether it would be acceptable in my city, and to my constituents, if the state were involved in hampering the discovery of the truth about the murder of one of its citizens. The answer to that question has to be an emphatic no. If that is the case for Cardiff, or for Leeds, Barnsley, St Helens, Sheffield, Worcester or any of the other constituencies that elect Members to this House, it is equally unacceptable for Belfast.

The troubles were a dark and violent time in the history of these islands. Thousands of civilians and soldiers—we remember our armed forces on this Armistice Day—lost their lives as a result of calculated brutality, which still echoes darkly down the generations. In that awful period, the appalling murder of Patrick Finucane in February 1989 was one of the darkest moments. Thirty-one years on, it remains a source of grave public concern, not just in Northern Ireland and Ireland, but across the United Kingdom and anywhere in the world where people seek and care about justice.

Both Lord Stevens and Judge Cory were clear that there was state collusion in the murder of Mr Finucane. As my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle said, the then Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, described the outcome of the separate de Silva review as revealing “shocking levels of state collusion.”—[*Official Report*, 12 December 2012; Vol. 555, c. 296.]

It is now 20 months since the Supreme Court found that inquiries into Mr Finucane's murder had been unlawful under article 2 of the European convention on human rights. Investigations that have taken place have had profound shortcomings, and those shortcomings, in the words of Lord Kerr,

“have hampered, if not indeed prevented, the uncovering of the truth about this murder.”

That this crime could happen at all in our country is in itself a shocking stain on the fabric of our recent history. That it has never been investigated to a lawful standard is a tear in that same fabric that needs to be repaired.

The issues at stake could scarcely be more important. The European convention on human rights is the foundation that underpins the Good Friday agreement and is the fundamental safeguard on which citizens rely. Those rights are not trivial. Compliance with them is non-negotiable.

As my hon. Friend has said, the family of Pat Finucane have had to wait too long for the adequate and effective investigation into his murder that is their right and the right of all citizens whom we represent in this place. Last month, as we have heard, Patrick Finucane's widow, Geraldine, was forced to take action in the High Court to seek a resolution from the Government. Mr Justice McAlinden, overseeing the case, described his deep unease at the approach of the current Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. This delay has added insult to injury. Mrs Finucane has received unequivocal undertakings from the British Government that such an inquiry will be held, and that should now be honoured.

The administrative burden in establishing an inquiry is simply not a justification to prevent the truth from emerging. The long years that have passed since the ceasefire and the Good Friday agreement have served to demonstrate that unless justice is done and seen to be done, the wounds of the past simply will not be allowed to heal, so I say to the Minister: the time has come to right past wrongs and allow this public inquiry to proceed.

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): The next speaker on the call list has given notice that he will be late, so I now call Stephanie Peacock.

4.46 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell, and, indeed, to see you in the Chair.

I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) on securing this incredibly important debate. The troubles were a violent and appalling time in our history. Veterans in my constituency served in Northern Ireland, and some lost colleagues who were murdered while on duty. Those whom I have had the privilege to meet since being elected value, as all of us do, the rule of law in this country. Upholding the rule of law is, and must be, one of our fundamental values.

Pat Finucane was going about his professional duties, in a professional manner, when he was murdered, in a cowardly and horrifying act, in his home in Belfast. For the Finucane family, like hundreds of other families of people who lost their lives during the troubles, the adequate and effective investigation into the murder of their loved one that is their right and our obligation has never taken place. Thirty-one years on from his murder, his family are still waiting. That is not a view or an opinion. The institution that has determined that an effective investigation has never taken place is UK judges in the highest court of the United Kingdom, on the basis of British law.

I therefore profoundly believe that the right thing for the Finucane family, for Northern Ireland and for everyone in the United Kingdom is for the commitments made by the British Government to hold a full public inquiry to be honoured. Why? It is important to remember why Judge Cory felt that a public inquiry was so important in this case—as he did with five of the six cases he identified for review at Weston Park. He said that a public inquiry must proceed in order

“to achieve the benefits of determining the flaws in the system and suggesting the required remedy”

and to address public concern. That is why it must be delivered and why commitments made to the Finucane family and the wider community must be kept. But it is also impossible not to think of the hundreds of families whose loved ones were murdered in the course of the troubles and who are still waiting for the truth about what happened to them.

The murders of more than 170 British soldiers are unsolved, as are the murders of hundreds of civilians at the hands of republican and loyalist terrorists. That is why it is more important than ever that a comprehensive solution to the legacy of the past is delivered. That means one that can deliver the truth and that has the confidence of those who are all too often forgotten—victims and their families.

The extraordinary work of Operation Kenova, led by the former Bedfordshire chief constable, Jon Boucher, is demonstrating that even many years on, important evidential opportunities can still be uncovered. As he told the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, families want investigations to be robust in search of the truth. That is why the recent statement from the Secretary of State, which seemed determined to draw a veil over legacy cases, would have been profoundly unsettling for many families of people who lost their lives at the hands of terrorists. As Jon Boucher said, that would be

“a legal novelty in the United Kingdom for serious crimes such as murder”.

The whole basis of the Stormont House agreement, which I fully accept was not perfect, was an effort to build a broad-based consensus on establishing and investigating the truth about unsolved murders. I therefore strongly urge the Minister not to resile from those commitments, and to remember the deep responsibility that he and the Northern Ireland Office have to deliver the truth to all victims and, from that, to build reconciliation.

4.50 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) for bringing before us this important debate. It is crucial that we get

a public inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane after all these years, and that we discuss the wider issues of the troubles in Northern Ireland, and Army, police and secret service collusion in particular.

Those are difficult, painful issues, but sweeping them under the carpet serves our society badly. If we want to live in safe, stable and hopeful communities, we cannot ignore our troubled past. If we want to create a future where violence and terrorism are a thing of the past, we have to start with an honest and truthful assessment of what led us to that dark place.

Clearly, it is important to remember the circumstances of Pat Finucane’s murder in 1989, painful as that may be, and the wider circumstances that led to this atrocity, but there is no need for the campaign for a public inquiry to persuade anyone of the facts, which have been conceded by Government. It has already been found that Pat Finucane’s shooting by loyalists involved state agents. That collusion has already been established.

Not only that, but in February last year the Supreme Court held that previous inquiries into the murder did not meet human rights standards. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has given a commitment in a court of law that a decision will be made by the end of the month on whether to order a public inquiry. I plead with him to do so, not just for the Finucane family but for the thousands of victims of the troubles.

The reality is that the family of Pat Finucane represent so many other victims of the troubles, families whose lives have been shattered not just by the tragic events that deprived them of their loved ones, but the secrecy, delay and cover-ups that have stood in the way of justice and truth. Since joining the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in June this year, I have sat in a number of hearings in which victims groups have described the distress of waiting for justice—sometimes not even justice, but only information—to understand the truth of what happened to their family members.

In the eyes of the people who matter most of all in this, the victims of the troubles, the Government have failed on the legacy issue. I have heard from all communities about a lack of confidence among the victims’ families that justice will be done, facts established and lessons learned. The Government now have a serious responsibility to repair some of the damage and to give people some sense of closure and peace, no matter how hard that is.

For Pat Finucane and his family—as the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), said—we need the full truth. The family and the many victims of the troubles need that, but also Northern Ireland needs that. The people of Northern Ireland, from all communities, have to be sure that the lessons of those terrible acts are learned, so that they will never happen again.

To get to that point, the Prime Minister, the Northern Ireland Office and the Government should act now, without any more delay. That starts with ordering a public inquiry into the full circumstances of Pat Finucane’s murder, and it must continue by re-establishing some confidence in the legacy process. Finally, we must all learn the lessons of those terrible tragedies and Northern Ireland’s traumatic past, not in order to dwell on the past or to reopen old rifts, but to look forward.

4.54 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell. I endorse what hon. Friends, particularly my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), have already said. I congratulate him on securing the debate.

In supporting the need for a full public inquiry into Pat Finucane's murder, I want to make it clear that that is not because I or the Finucane family believe in a hierarchy of victims or that the grief and pain of some is greater than that of others. It is the merits of this case and the appalling vista of state involvement and its planning of murder that mark it out as totemic in getting to the truth of exactly what went on during the troubles. Geraldine Finucane's dignity and dedication to her husband and her pursuit of justice, not only for him but for many other victims, is inspirational. She was left to be her children's mammy and daddy—to be the breadwinner—and to do it all while suffering the unbearable grief of losing her beloved partner. She is a remarkable woman and I am proud to know her.

My friend Phyllis Carrothers is another such woman. Her husband Douglas—or Dougie, as he was known to family and friends—was murdered by the IRA in County Fermanagh in 1991. He was an RUC reserve constable and Phyllis went on to chair the Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Widows Association. She and her children have never had the truth, nor has she ever had an apology. The unanswered questions about the who, the what and, fundamentally, the why still remain. She deserves justice too. We must remember that the cases of Pat Finucane and all others are about people, and not just about process—their lived experiences and the impact it had on them and subsequent generations. Time is not always enough to heal.

January will be the 45th anniversary of a period of days in 1976 that saw some of the worst incidents of the troubles take place in the part of the world that I come from. On 3 January 1976, a bomb was left outside my grandmother's pub, the Lough Inn in Camlough. A great deal of damage was caused to the village and my Aunt Ann, who was 12 years old at the time and saw the bombers, was injured. It is widely believed that members of what had become known as the Glenanne gang were involved.

The next evening, on 4 January, elements of the same gang, which included members of the security forces, murdered three members of the Reavey family a few miles away in Whitecross and three members of the O'Dowd family—they, like my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle, were members of the Social Democratic and Labour party—in Ballydougan. They were targeted and killed in their home simply because they were Catholics. No one has ever been brought to justice. The following day, 5 January, 10 Protestant workmen from Bessbrook were taken off a minibus and murdered at Kingsmill. Like those the night before, their religion was the only basis on which their lives were so cruelly taken. All those dead left behind loved ones.

Eugene Reavey lost his three brothers. The unimaginable impact that must have had on him and his family was exacerbated when, just over 20 years ago, it was said in this House that he had had some involvement in Kingsmill. Whatever the motivation behind that allegation, it caused incredible pain. It was and is completely and utterly

false. The police, including the then chief constable, and the Historical Enquiries Team's investigation are very clear that Eugene Reavey had no involvement whatsoever in Kingsmill. It is right that the record is corrected here today.

There were two survivors of Kingsmill. The first was Richard Hughes, the only Catholic on the bus. When it was stopped by masked men, he was singled out and at first believed that he was going to be killed, only to be told to run and not to look back. He never spoke about it or the trauma and aching pain he must have felt. My memory of Mr Hughes — as the paperboy who delivered his *Belfast Telegraph* every evening — is of a kind, quiet gentleman. He was a victim too. Although he passed away some years ago, I hope his daughter Bernadette has some comfort that what he and his family have endured is recognised in the House.

The second survivor was Alan Black, a Protestant, who was shot 18 times and lay in the rain while the dead bodies of his friends lay on him and around him. I urge hon. Members to read about Alan's experience and his words. His dignity, loss, compassion and grief are simultaneously inspirational and crushing. I have nothing but respect and admiration for him. He deserves justice too. Alan, along with Brian Sloan and others, set up a cross-community football club in Bessbrook, Brookvale FC. Many years ago, they developed a link with a Merseyside schools football association official, the wonderful and recently sadly deceased Terry Duffy, whose local club Rainford Rangers is, in a pretty remarkable twist of fate, based in my constituency. It was a special and incredible honour for me to welcome Brookvale to Rainford as the MP from Bessbrook for St Helens North.

None of this is easy. The answer is not in the wishy-washy, "Why can't we get along?" whataboutery. I know that these are deeply divisive hugely emotive and seemingly intractable matters, but I do believe that in unlocking the case of Pat Finucane, we can go to the heart of providing a way forward. The Government have a duty to keep their word and ensure a full public inquiry. Then we must all dedicate ourselves to that inclusive, comprehensive approach to dealing with the past; one that puts victims and survivors, truth, justice and remembrance at its core.

5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I first congratulate you, Ms Bardell, on being elevated to your new position? I wish you well and know that you will do the job extremely well. I thank the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) for raising the issue. I spoke to him beforehand, so he knows where I am coming from. I just want to put some things on the record. On the facts of the case that he has so meticulously outlined—I say this for the record—my heart goes out to the family members who have been left with an empty chair that will never be filled. They have my sincere condolences. No one should ever lose a loved one in such circumstances. That is where I am coming from. That is my standpoint.

Unfortunately, it is the history of Northern Ireland that too many families have been left feeling this endless grief. The hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) just referred to that. Too many daughters have walked down the aisle alone, too many sons have graduated without their proud parent watching on, and too many mothers have wept over the clothes of their sons whose scent has long faded away. The devastation

is clear in so many households in the Province to this day, and their loss must be acknowledged. I want to put that on the record.

I wish that that were not the case. I wish that my cousin Shelley did not have memories of that first Christmas without my cousin Kenneth Smyth after he was ruthlessly murdered 49 years ago, on 10 December 1971, by the IRA. I wish that his companion, friend and fellow worker, Daniel McCormick, had not been murdered. He happened to be a Roman Catholic, by the way, and the IRA murdered both of them on a road outside Castlederg 49 years ago. When Shelley came to me with Kenneth's file clutched in her hands and tears in her eyes, I wish that I could have given her the justice she sought—I and everyone else here has equally sought justice—but I could not do that because it was not in my power.

This is not about tit for tat. I do not seek in any way to take away from the pain that the Finucane family felt and feel today. I, too, have had my debate in this House calling for the murder of Kenneth Smyth to be reopened, as well as that of Lexie Cummings, who was murdered by the IRA in Strabane. I have called for their murderers and the collaborators to be brought to justice, but nothing has been achieved, not because they did not deserve it—they did—but because they did not get their justice.

Kenneth Smyth's sister and family, including my side of the family, long to see justice, yet we must trust in the most righteous judge of all. I am a Christian and I believe that you might escape justice in this world, but you will not escape it in the next. I believe that in my heart. I am sure that others here would concur with my sentiments. The righteous judge will mete out the appropriate justice to all those evil men and women who killed and have not been made accountable.

This debate was titled well: that consideration be given to the potential merits of an inquiry. I do see a family devastated and I want justice for them. At the same time, I see Kenneth Smyth's family and Lexie Cummings' family. I have a meeting coming up on a case that has come to me in the last few weeks. Private John Birch was one of the four Ulster Defence Regiment men murdered at Ballydugan, which I have spoken about in this House—two or three Members here will remember that debate. Of the four UDR men murdered, I knew three of them personally. I know where they come from. Private John Birch's son seeks answers to assuage his perpetual grief. He wants an explanation. He has told me in an email that he needs to talk to me about it. I said I will do that.

In any consideration of any public inquiry, the consideration of the third of cases that remain unsolved must be enshrined within. Do the families that I have spoken about, my constituents, not deserve the same treatment? They do. With all due respect, who will meet my cousin Shelley and tell her why the disgraceful murder of Pat Finucane deserves a level of justice that Kenneth Smyth is unworthy of? Who will explain why her pain and quest for answers should not merit a public inquiry, but Pat Finucane's does?

I wish—I mean this with all my heart—for every grieving person in the Province to have the closure that we all need and we all wish to have. I wish for every child to feel that the loss of their father or mother has not slipped by. I want to fight for Jonathon Birch to

have the full story of the murder of his father at Ballydugan 30 years ago to be heard, just as it is being done on behalf of the Finucane family today. I will not say that one person must simply accept a life of pain and questions while someone else deserves attention from the Government—I say that very respectfully.

Unless someone will attend the homes of any of the 211 widows of RUC officers and tell them that the slaughter of their loved ones is acceptable but that of others is not, I will not be able to accept this call for an inquiry. Unless someone will tell a child whose father was taken away so early that he has no memories of him, that his pain is not deserving of a high-level intervention, I will not be able to accept this call. I say again that this is not tit for tat, or saying that my pain is worse than your pain—it is not that. It is acknowledging that the Government should not create levels of mourning.

I want peace. I want peace for the Finucanes, just as I want it for every family who still grieves, but public inquiries cannot be the solution. Pat Finucane's death mattered, and it still does, but so did the killing of Kenneth Smyth and Lexie Cummings. The same is true of John Birch, Steven Smart, John Bradley and Michael Adams—the four UDR men killed at Ballydugan—and of Stuart Montgomery, an 18-year-old police officer who was murdered in Pomeroy. It is also true of the other 3,200 murders in the Province. Their loss is felt today, and the pain of the innocent matters. So does the call for equal justice and, indeed, for this nation collectively to move forward.

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Unfortunately, we are missing a Member, so we will now move to the shadow Minister and then the Minister. Even though we have gained a bit of time, I ask that we make time for Colum Eastwood, given the importance of the debate, so that he has an opportunity to wind up at the end.

5.6 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell—that rather exposes the idea that we are not being quite so genuine when other Members occupy the Chair.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) on securing the debate and on his extremely powerful contribution about the merits of a public inquiry into the killing of Pat Finucane. We have heard from Members with real lived experience of Northern Ireland about the merits of such an inquiry, and we have heard powerful, heartbreaking testimony about that murder and about many more from the troubles that remain unsolved and were never fully investigated.

Let me respond first to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), because he makes a powerful case. He and my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) are right to say that none of us is arguing for a hierarchy of victims. All of us want to see truth and justice delivered for the families of victims of the troubles, just as they would have received had their loved ones lost their lives anywhere else in the UK.

One of the tragedies of the troubles is that the killing of Pat Finucane was not distinctive enough to merit a public inquiry. Such brutal murders—many of which have never received even the pretence of an investigation, let alone one that is fully compliant with article 2

[*Louise Haigh*]

—numbered in their thousands, as the hon. Member for Strangford said. That remains one of the most significant and enduring elements of the Good Friday agreement that we have yet to deliver on in Westminster.

It is therefore reasonable to ask why the killing of Pat Finucane merits a public inquiry and more attention than any other murder during the troubles, not least the killing of police officers, veterans and civilians. As has been spelled out, however, the answer dates back to the Weston Park accord and the findings of Judge Cory, who recommended public inquiries into a number of murders. As we have heard, of the four inquiries that he recommended, only that into the killing of Pat Finucane remains outstanding. None of the subsequent investigations has met the legal standards that are held by the British Government. All have fallen short of the public inquiry that for too long the Finucane family have been campaigning for. Disgracefully, they have been forced yet again to take the Government to the highest court in the country in order to be told that the Government remain in breach of article 2 of the European convention on human rights and the Human Rights Act 1998.

As we know, the Court stopped short of directing the Government to set up an independent inquiry, but the Labour party is clear, as indeed are the Finucane family, that it is the only legal way forward for the Government to proceed. If the Minister considers that they can meet their obligations in another way, we believe it is incumbent on him to lay out what options he considers are available to the Government.

Northern Ireland is a society that has made so much progress towards reconciliation in the past two decades, but the intervening years have served to demonstrate that families, communities and society as a whole will struggle to take the difficult remaining steps towards reconciliation until a solution is found to deal with the legacy of the past. It is dangerously naive to think that a veil can simply be drawn over so many atrocities and outrages that occurred over so many years.

We have an opportunity now for Northern Ireland to escape the grip of the past with a mechanism that delivers the truth about what took place. As my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) said, Operation Kenova and the outstanding work of Jon Boucher demonstrate that that is still possible, that there is a way forward and that a victim-centred approach can deliver the truth. That is what the majority of the victims, including the Finucanes, have been fighting for all these years. They have been fighting for a truth process that acknowledges the injustice of the past, clears their loved ones' names and enables reconciliation. That was the essence of the Stormont House agreement and the basis on which consensus was reached. I say to the Minister, achieving that will be impossible without building that consensus.

Everything that has been achieved in Northern Ireland has been achieved on the basis of consensus. The Belfast, St Andrews, Hillsborough Castle, Stormont House and the New Decade, New Approach agreements were all made possible by painstakingly building consensus across communities and parties, and in partnership with the Irish Government. It would be foolish to think that that legacy should or could be any different.

Ministers committed 10 months ago to find that broad-based consensus on legacy, underpinned by the Stormont House mechanisms, so the departure from that approach in March this year caused enormous anger and shock from victims and people across Northern Ireland society. Trust in the Government's approach has been understandably fractured in Northern Ireland. We are desperate for the Government to get this right.

I will repeat in public what I have said to the Secretary of State in private. We will work with the Government and help them to achieve consensus on this issue in a way that respects the Stormont House agreement and delivers on legacy. There must be no party politics for Labour and the Conservatives on this. As co-signatories to the Good Friday agreement, we deeply feel the duty for Westminster to get this right, whichever party is in power. It falls to our generation of politicians to take grave decisions and finally deliver on legacy.

I say to the Minister, it is time for the Northern Ireland Office to start engaging. I urge the Government to think carefully about their next steps, to work to build that broad-based consensus. Families have had to campaign for too long for the basics that would have been afforded them, had their loved-ones been murdered anywhere else in the United Kingdom. If we do not resolve this now, victims and survivors will be here in another 10 years' time having the same debates, and the people of Northern Ireland will continue to suffer for our collective failure.

5.12 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Robin Walker): I am grateful for your chairmanship, Ms Bardell. Congratulations on taking the Chair. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in this powerful debate. I see that the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) has just joined us and was unable to speak, but I am sure he would have made similarly powerful points.

The hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) spoke passionately and poignantly on behalf of his constituents. I absolutely recognise the force and importance of his contribution. The murder of Patrick Finucane on 12 February 1989 in front of his family is one of the highest-profile cases from the troubles. As the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) said, it is a shocking case in any situation. It was an appalling crime and it caused tremendous suffering. I acknowledge the tributes paid to Mr Finucane's family and their quest for justice in this respect.

Previous investigations have made it clear that there was collusion in this case. That was totally unacceptable and the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, apologised publicly for what he described as the "shocking levels of ...collusion" that took place. I want to reiterate that apology today. This case is, sadly, but one example, as the hon. Members for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, of the violence and tragedy experienced by far too many individuals and families across Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom during the troubles.

Members have referred to a number of tragic cases affecting far too many families, including the case of the Reavey brothers in 1976. I thank the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) for the important intervention he has made on that matter, and I note that

the Police Service of Northern Ireland Historical Enquiries Team found no wrongdoing whatsoever by Eugene Reavey in the incident that he raised.

Over 3,500 people were killed during the troubles, the vast majority at the hands of republican or loyalist terrorists. Many of those murdered were members of the police and security services, and it is only due to the courageous efforts of our police and security services that we have the peace and relative stability that Northern Ireland enjoys today. This Government are sincere and unstinting in their gratitude to those who served throughout the long years of the troubles to uphold the rule of law and democracy. Many hundreds of them, as we have heard, paid the ultimate price for doing so.

As the Government of the United Kingdom, we must be equally clear when the high standards to which we rightly hold ourselves and our service personnel have not been met. As hon. Members will be aware, the murder of Patrick Finucane has been the subject of a number of different investigations, some of which I will set out briefly. A major investigation into his death was launched immediately after the murder by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Responsibility for his murder was claimed by the proscribed loyalist paramilitary group the Ulster Freedom Fighters the day after the murder.

An inquest into the cause and immediate circumstances of the death was held on 6 September 1990. Between September 1989 and April 2003, Lord Stevens, the former chief constable of the Metropolitan Police, carried out three separate investigations into allegations of collusion between the security forces and loyalist paramilitaries, the third of which—Stevens 3—was specifically into Mr Finucane's murder.

As a result of the Stevens 3 investigation Ken Barrett, a loyalist terrorist, was charged with the murder of Mr Finucane. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced in September 2004. William Stobie, a former RUC agent, was also charged with aiding and abetting the murder of Patrick Finucane, but the Director of Public Prosecutions discontinued the prosecution in the light of concerns about the mental state of a key prosecution witness.

As part of the investigation, the Stevens 3 team also investigated allegations that RUC officers had encouraged the murder by providing information about Patrick Finucane, that they assisted in the aftermath by removing a roadblock, and that they failed to act on intelligence in the aftermath of the murder in relation to the movement of weapons. The investigation also included the operational activity of the Army's force research unit, reviewing and analysing all material relating to the FRU's operational activity. The findings and recommendations from the investigation were submitted to the Director of Public Prosecutions, and in June 2007 the DPP directed that the test for prosecution had not been met.

A further independent review conducted by Sir Desmond de Silva, QC was announced on 12 October 2011. His terms of reference were to produce a full public account of any involvement by the Army, the RUC, the Security Service or any other Government body in the murder of Patrick Finucane. Sir Desmond had access to approximately 12,000 witness statements, 32,000 documents and more than 1 million pages of material produced as part of the three investigations led by Lord Stevens. He also sought and published a significant amount of additional material, including original intelligence documents, alongside his report. All relevant Government Departments and agencies co-operated fully and openly with his review.

The Historical Enquiries Team within the PSNI subsequently reviewed the content of the de Silva report to determine whether it provided any opportunities to progress the investigation into Mr Finucane's murder. The investigating officer appointed to carry out the review concluded that there was no reason to review the decision of the Public Prosecution Service in 2007.

As we have heard, following judicial review proceedings the Supreme Court made a declaration that the state had not discharged its obligation to conduct an article 2 compliant investigation into the death of Mr Finucane; however, the court stopped short of ordering a full public inquiry, stating:

"It is for the state to decide, in light of the incapacity of Sir Desmond de Silva's review and the inquiries which preceded it to meet the procedural requirement of article 2, what form of investigation, if indeed any is now feasible, is required in order to meet that requirement."

Following the Supreme Court judgment, an independent review of previous investigations was commissioned by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), to help establish what steps should be taken to address the issues identified by the judgment. The current Secretary of State also met the Finucane family shortly after his appointment in February 2020.

The Secretary of State recognises the importance of reaching a properly informed decision on this matter and is committed to making that decision by the end of the month. That involves many complex issues, and it is right that he considers them all carefully. As the process remains ongoing, it is not appropriate for me to make further comment at this time. Although I am therefore not in a position to respond to all the specific points and requests made by Members, please be assured that I have listened carefully to them and they now form part of the public record.

Kevin Brennan: I am genuinely very grateful to the Minister for giving way. Can he tell the House how the Secretary of State will make that decision public when he takes it by the end of the month? Will it be in the form of a statement to the House, for example?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I assure him that we will seek to update the House as appropriate. Clearly, the first response should be made to the court and to the family, but I will pass on that point to the Secretary of State and urge him to make the decision clear to the House at the first opportunity.

A number of Members raised concerns about progress on wider legacy reform. I reiterate the Government's commitment to addressing the legacy of the troubles in a way that focuses on reconciliation, delivers for victims and ends the cycle of reinvestigations that has failed victims and veterans alike. As with other priorities, progress on that has been affected by the circumstances of the past few months, but we are moving forward as quickly as we can.

The Government understand just how complex legacy issues are—that is why they remain unresolved, more than 20 years after the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. However, we are determined to get it right, and we remain committed to working with all parts of the community in Northern Ireland, including victims' groups and families, to do so. I recognise the

[Mr Robin Walker]

challenge to engage in that respect from the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), and I can assure her that that engagement will be taking place.

It is vital that we now find a way forward that helps society in Northern Ireland to look forward together, rather than looking back to a divisive past. As the hon. Member for City of Durham said, we must ensure that, as we move this process forward, people can look forward to the future.

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): I thank Members for their co-operation on timing, and I now call Colum Eastwood to wind up.

5.20 pm

Colum Eastwood: I thank all hon. Members who took part in the debate, and I particularly thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his words and for his attitude. Seamus Mallon once told me that every single death diminishes us all, and I stand by that principle today. I want truth for everybody: no matter where you came from, no matter who murdered you, you and your family deserve truth. I believe that our society deserves truth, and needs truth, because we cannot move forward in a spirit of reconciliation and partnership unless we take away the dark clouds and dark corners where this information is held.

I am also very grateful to the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) for righting a wrong today. A former Member for North Antrim made a scurrilous accusation in this place about Eugene Reavey. Eugene Reavey is one of the most decent, upstanding people I know, and what was said about him was absolutely wrong and totally hurtful. Why anybody would think that piling more pain on to a family—one of many such families—would have some sort of value, I just do not understand.

This is about all of us. Pat Finucane's family are not trying to tell anybody that their pain is worse than anybody else's or that their truth is more deserving than anybody else's, but this case, as I and others have already said, goes right to the heart of the British Government's involvement in Northern Ireland. The act of the murder, the cover-up of how it occurred and the denial of truth tell us a very clear story about the UK's intervention in Northern Ireland.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise to the hon. Gentleman; I had shadow Front-Bench duties, which meant I could not take part in this debate

earlier. I thank him for allowing me to make an intervention. I was a witness to the Macpherson inquiry on Stephen Lawrence. That single murder and that inquiry shone such a light on police practice in the UK that they fundamentally changed it. The hon. Gentleman is making an eloquent winding-up speech. The same light, shone on the case of Pat Finucane, in terms of the police and Northern Ireland security services and their practices, such as the wiping of hard drives, could transform things in the way they were transformed post Stephen Lawrence. That is why I think this is such an important case, and the hon. Gentleman is making an eloquent case for it.

Colum Eastwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; that gets to the core of it. I just do not believe that our society will properly move forward unless we know the truth of what happened. I know the Minister says that legacy issues are complex—well, they are difficult, they are painful, but they are pretty straightforward. What people want is the truth. What is complex about that? We know how hard this is—we live it every single day. Pat Finucane's family live it, the O'Dowds live it, the Reaveys live it and all the victims of our terrible, terrible conflict are living it still today, and our society is sick because of it.

The Minister has an opportunity to take some of that pain away, to shine some light into dark corners. The Government made this promise—20 years ago, a promise was made to a family and it has not been kept, and this Government have a responsibility to keep that promise. A full, public, independent judicial inquiry is all now that will suffice. The case has been made. The promises have been made. It is time now to deliver.

If we want to deliver on all of the truth and if we want to get right to the heart of it, to the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford, there is a process. It is agreed. It is another international agreement. It is called the Stormont House agreement. If we want to sort all these issues out, we must implement that, bring the victims in from the cold and deliver the truth that they require. That is what we need to move forward as a society, and I fundamentally believe that we will not do so unless this issue is dealt with.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a public inquiry into the death of Pat Finucane.

4.25 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 11 November 2020

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

National Security and Investment Bill and White Paper

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): I am today introducing the National Security and Investment Bill to update the Government's investment screening powers and strike the right balance between maintaining an open economy and giving us the tools we need to intervene in cases of serious concern. I am also publishing the Government's response to the public consultation on the "National Security and Investment" White Paper, an impact assessment for the Bill and a revised draft statement of policy. In addition, I am launching a consultation on secondary legislation to define the sectors subject to mandatory notification.

This Government are a champion for free trade, recognising that inward investment is economically highly beneficial. Investment in UK plc boosts productivity by backing businesses to create good jobs and develop skills, and will help support our economic recovery from covid-19. Since 2010-11, over 600,000 new jobs have been created in our economy thanks to over 16,000 FDI projects. During that decade, over \$750 billion has flowed into the UK as a result of FDI. Investors value our legal system, our highly competitive tax regime, and a stable regulatory approach that cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world. The recently announced Office for Investment will build on the Government's proud record and ensure that the UK remains a premier investment destination as we take advantage of our new status outside the European Union as an independent country.

An open approach to international investment must, however, also include appropriate safeguards to protect our national security and the safety of our citizens. The UK and our allies face continued and broad-ranging hostile activity from foreign intelligence agencies and others, who seek to compromise our national security. When it comes to investment, we are seeing novel means to undermine the UK's national security that go beyond traditional mergers and acquisitions and also go beyond the reach of our current powers; such as structuring deals to obscure who is behind them. Such behaviour, left unchecked, can leave sensitive UK businesses vulnerable to disruption and espionage. It is crucial that the Government are able to fully combat these threats.

Our current powers to prevent hostile foreign investment in our businesses are set out in the Enterprise Act 2002. Technological, economic, and geopolitical changes across the globe over the last 20 years mean that reforms to the Government's powers to scrutinise transactions on national security grounds are required. Currently, subject to minor exceptions, target businesses must have a UK turnover of over £70 million or meet a combined share of supply test before Government can intervene on national security grounds. This means that businesses below the £70 million threshold, including those at the very forefront of technological breakthroughs and national

security-sensitive innovation, are too often beyond the scope of the present legislation. The Government are also unable to intervene in acquisitions of sensitive assets whose transfer might have national security implications.

The Government are therefore legislating to update their powers to respond to these changing threats and to bring our regime in line with that of our Five Eyes allies and other security partners.

More security for British businesses and people

The National Security and Investment Bill will require notification and clearance of investments in businesses in key sectors, such as defence and artificial intelligence, to our new Investment Security Unit. A full list is provided at the end of this statement and today we are publishing a consultation paper on the definition of these sectors. This consultation will be used to refine the definitions so that they are clear, allow parties to self-assess whether they need to notify, and are narrowly focused on the specific parts of sectors where risks are most likely to arise. This approach will ensure that the regime is targeted and proportionate, and keeps Britain firmly open for business. The Bill will bring us into line with other countries, such as the USA, whose Committee on Foreign Investment also operates a mandatory notification model that investors will be familiar with.

Other investments can also be notified to the Investment Security Unit or proactively "called in" by the Government for national security assessments. This maintains the current flexibility under the Enterprise Act 2002 so that the Government can address national security risks wherever they arise in the economy. The Bill will cover acquisitions of assets, including intellectual property such as trade secrets and software, so that the risks of such transactions can also be fully scrutinised. This combined approach will provide a proportionate defence against hostile actors targeting sensitive sectors in ever more novel and complex ways.

Transactions subject to mandatory notification will not be allowed to proceed without Government approval and any deal that is completed without approval will be automatically void in law. This approach is in line with powers under the French and Italian regimes.

The regime will be underpinned by both civil and criminal sanctions, creating effective deterrents for non-compliance with statutory obligations, in line with many of our allies' screening regimes, including France and Germany.

The new powers are not limited by turnover or share of supply thresholds, meaning acquisitions of companies of any size, in any sector, can be examined, providing the Secretary of State reasonably suspects that the transaction has given, or may give rise to, a national security risk.

We have increased the period for "calling in" non-notified transactions which the Secretary of State reasonably suspects may raise national security concerns, to up to five years after they take place—and only those which take place from the point of Bill introduction onwards. Again, this is similar to the French, German and Italian regimes and will help to ensure that the risks posed by hostile actors seeking to complete deals in secret can be addressed. As outlined above, by notifying transactions—including after they take place—which are not covered by mandatory notification but may none the less be of potential national security interest, businesses and investors will be able to get a decision and achieve deal certainty.

Once a transaction has been called in and a full assessment process has been carried out, where the clear legal test is met, the Government will be able to impose remedies on transactions. This includes, in the small minority of cases where it is the only appropriate way to address the risks posed by the transaction, blocking or unwinding a deal. For the avoidance of doubt, the Government expect that the vast majority of transactions will be cleared outright, that only a small minority are likely to require conditions, and that only those transactions that present the most serious risks are likely to be blocked. None the less, it is vital we have all the necessary tools available to keep this country safe and such remedies are consistent with the approach under our existing legislation.

The Business Secretary will be the single decision maker for the new regime and will act with advice from the Investment Security Unit, policy experts in Government and with full information from the interested parties, including the ability to hear evidence from the parties in person. This will ensure consistency of decisions across all sectors, that there is a single avenue of approach for business and investors through the Business Department, and that a pro-business outlook underpins the very heart of our investment screening process.

Slicker investment routes and more certainty for businesses

We will make any interactions with Government simpler and quicker by providing clearance to most transactions within 30 working days, with notifiable investments submitted through a new digital portal. Timelines for assessments will be set out in law and not set by the Government on a case-by-case basis as at present under the Enterprise Act 2002, which can take many months to receive clearance.

The digital portal will be available upon commencement of the new regime. In the meantime, businesses and investors can contact the Government to discuss potential transactions of interest by email at: investment.screening@beis.gov.uk

The National Security and Investment Bill requires notified transactions to be either cleared or “called in” within 30 working days of the notification being given and accepted. If a transaction is cleared, then there is no further opportunity after this point for the Government to intervene—unless false or misleading information was provided—so businesses and investors can achieve maximum certainty.

Once a transaction has been “called in”, the Government will then have 30 working days, extendable—in cases where the specific legal test is met—by a further 45 working days, to carry out a full assessment of the transaction. That may include gathering further information about the deal, identifying the nature and extent of the risks it may pose, and working with the parties to explore potential remedies.

These statutory timescales will enable business and investors to plan their affairs with clarity about when they can expect decisions and give them the confidence they need to do business in the UK. Again, any transaction cleared following such an assessment cannot be re-examined by the Government at a later date—unless false or misleading information was provided—and the outcome of all cases requiring the imposition of final remedies must be published by the Business Secretary.

This, alongside the publication of an annual report as required by the Bill, reflects the Government’s commitment to providing the greatest level of transparency possible

within the confines of a national security regime. Businesses, investors and their advisers will be able to use this information to attain greater certainty about their own activities and the types of prospective transactions which should be notified.

A regime in line with our allies

We are not acting in isolation. Many of our closest allies, including our Five Eyes partners and France, Germany, and Japan, have similarly reformed their powers in this area over the last few years.

Like us, the United States has also recently introduced mandatory notification requirements in specific parts of the economy to respond to the changing threats. In July, the Australian Government also released draft legislation requiring foreign investors to seek approval to acquire a direct interest in sensitive national security businesses. We will continue to work with like-minded countries to address the shared risks that we face, including through the vector of investment.

The UK’s proportionate updates build on the best practice established around the world by like-minded countries and deliver a balanced regime that provides the Government with the flexible powers they need while keeping our country firmly open to investment.

The Government have been clear for a number of years about their intention to introduce legislation in the area of national security and investment. As we re-build from covid-19 where sensitive British businesses may be vulnerable, we must go further and ensure that the Government can intervene in any deal across the economy that raises risks.

In summary, the Government believe that the final package of reforms introduced to Parliament in the National Security and Investment Bill today strikes the right balance between maintaining the openness and attractiveness of the UK as a destination for inward investment, while also providing the Government with the appropriate powers they need to protect the country.

I will lay both the Government response to the White Paper consultation and the accompanying Bill before Parliament. I will place copies of the impact assessment, the draft statement of policy, and the consultation on secondary legislation to define the sectors subject to mandatory notification, in the Libraries of the both House.

List of sectors with activities to be covered by mandatory notification

- Advanced Materials
- Advanced Robotics
- Artificial Intelligence
- Civil Nuclear
- Communications
- Computing Hardware
- Critical Suppliers to Government
- Critical Suppliers to the Emergency Services
- Cryptographic Authentication
- Data Infrastructure
- Defence
- Energy
- Engineering Biology
- Military and Dual Use
- Quantum Technologies
- Satellite and Space Technologies
- Transport

TREASURY

Economic Crime Plan: Action 19

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

As part of the Government's July 2019 Economic Crime Plan^[1], the Treasury undertook to consider the case for a Government power to block listings^[2] on UK financial markets on the grounds of national security. This work has concluded and indicates that there are possible scenarios in which a proposed listing may potentially give rise to national security concerns. Therefore, alongside today's introduction of the National Security and Investment (NS&I) Bill, the Government are announcing their intention to bring forward a precautionary power to block listings on national security grounds.

In designing this power, the Government will take full account of the fact that companies from all over the world come to the UK, as a world-leading financial centre, in order to raise capital. They are attracted by the depth, breadth and openness of our markets as well as London's reputation for clean and transparent markets. This power will reinforce that reputation and help us maintain London's status as a world-class listings destination. The Treasury will publish a full consultation to inform the design of the power, which we expect to launch in early 2021. Further information will be set out in the consultation document.

^[1] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/economic-crime-plan-2019-to-2022/economic-crime-plan-2019-to-2022-accessible-version>.

^[2] When a company wants to raise capital, it can do this through "listing" its securities on a public market, such as the London Stock Exchange (LSE).

[HCWS570]

Notification of Contingent Liability

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Bank of England decided at its meeting ending on 4 November to ask for an expansion in the maximum limit of purchases that may be undertaken by the Asset Purchase Facility (APF). This will encompass up to £150 billion of further purchases of gilts to support the economy.

In light of the recent economic conditions, the MPC judged further asset purchases financed by the issuance of central bank reserves should be undertaken to enable the MPC to meet its statutory objectives, and thereby support the economy. I have therefore authorised an increase in the total size of the APF of £150 billion. This will bring the maximum total size of the APF from £745 to £895 billion.

In line with the requirements in the MPC remit, the amendments to the APF that could affect the allocation of credit and pose risks to the Exchequer have been discussed with Treasury officials. The risk control framework previously agreed with the Treasury will remain in place, and HM Treasury will keep monitoring risks to public funds from the facility through regular risk oversight meetings and enhanced information sharing with the Bank.

There will continue to be an opportunity for the Treasury to provide views to the MPC on the design of the schemes within the APF, as they affect the Government's broader economic objectives and may pose risks to the Exchequer.

The Government will continue to indemnify the Bank and the APF from any losses arising out of, or in connection with, the facility. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

A full departmental minute has been laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS569]

EDUCATION

Covid-19: Students Returning Home

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): As a Government we have made a commitment to ensure students living at university will be able to go home at the end of term, if they choose to do so. Today, I am announcing the measures that we are putting in place to enable students to return home as safely as possible.

The national restrictions are set in law to finish on 2 December and the Government are committed to this date. In order to ensure that students can return home at the end of the autumn term but also reduce any transmission risk, the Government are asking that students return home once the national restrictions have been lifted, in a "student travel window" lasting from 3 to 9 December. This excludes students who have tested positive or been notified by the NHS Test and Trace system.

Universities should stagger departure dates across faculties and with other institutions in the region to manage pressure on transport infrastructure. In order to ensure that students can travel home during this window, higher education providers should cease in-person teaching no later than 9 December. Moving to online learning by 9 December will allow students to start to return home, and any students who have tested positive to complete their period of self-isolation and return home before Christmas.

As the Prime Minister announced this week, we are also working closely with universities to roll out mass testing for students. We have made huge strides in our testing capability in recent weeks, and we will offer this to as many students as possible before they travel home, targeting this in areas of high prevalence. This will help to provide further confidence that students can leave safely if they test negative. If a student tests positive or they are told to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace before their departure, they will need to remain in self-isolation, following the relevant guidance. Moving all learning online by 9 December allows enough time for students to complete this isolation period, where required, before returning home for Christmas.

Under the current national restrictions students will have completed a four-week period of national restriction by 2 December, limiting the risk of them contracting and transmitting coronavirus (covid-19). As this is a key measure to reduce the risk of transmission to their families and friends at home, it is very important that students comply with the measures for the duration of the period of national restrictions and manage social interactions safely between 3 December and the point of travel. I ask students to work with us to keep themselves and their families safe, while allowing them to return home at the end of term if they choose to do so.

We are working with the devolved Administrations to ensure that all students, no matter where they live or study, are treated fairly and can travel home as safely as possible to keep all our communities safe.

English students at universities in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland should follow the guidance relevant to where they are living before returning home. When they return to England, they should follow their local guidance for their home area. Students returning to their home in England who have not completed the four weeks of national restrictions should undertake at least 14 days of restricted contact either before or after return home to minimise their risk of transmission.

We know that not all students will be able to go home, or may choose not to do so. It is vital that support continues for those who choose to stay at university over Christmas, including our international

students, care leavers and those who may be estranged from their families. We have asked universities to ensure they have plans for those students who remain on campus and this includes ensuring that support continues over winter break.

Finally, I want to assure parents, students and staff that their welfare is our priority. The hard work of university staff has meant we are able to keep students and staff as safe as possible during term, and I am very grateful for their efforts to deliver an appropriate balance of online and in-person teaching, as agreed with public health teams. We are pleased we can now announce how students can travel home at the end of term, while keeping themselves, their families, and their communities, as safe as possible.

[HCWS571]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 11 November 2020

| | <i>Col. No.</i> | | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|---|-----------------|--|-----------------|
| PRIME MINISTER | 897 | SCOTLAND—continued | |
| Engagements..... | 897 | Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme..... | 888 |
| SCOTLAND | 888 | Economic Support: Covid-19..... | 894 |
| Co-ordinated Response to Covid-19: Devolved | | Strengthening the Union..... | 895 |
| Administrations..... | 890 | Voluntary and Community Organisations: | |
| | | Funding..... | 893 |

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 11 November 2020

| | <i>Col. No.</i> | | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|---|-----------------|--|-----------------|
| BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL | | TREASURY | 39WS |
| STRATEGY | 35WS | Economic Crime Plan: Action 19..... | 39WS |
| National Security and Investment Bill and White | | Notification of Contingent Liability | 39WS |
| Paper..... | 35WS | | |
| EDUCATION | 40WS | | |
| Covid-19: Students Returning Home | 40WS | | |

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Wednesday 18 November 2020**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 11 November 2020

Armistice Day [Col. 887]

Royal Assent to Acts Passed [Col. 888]

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 888] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Scotland

Prime Minister

Covid-19 Lockdown: Homelessness and Rough Sleepers [Col. 907]

Answer to urgent question—(Kelly Tolhurst)

National Security and Investment [Col. 924]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Supported Housing (Regulation) [Col. 925]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Kerry McCarthy)—agreed to

Bill presented, and read the First time

Remembrance, UK Armed Forces and Society [Col. 929]

General debate

Covid-19 [Col. 977]

General debate

Petition [Col. 1024]

Coventry Blitz: 80th Anniversary [Col. 1025]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

North of England: Economic Support [Col. 379WH]

Supported Accommodation: HMOs [Col. 404WH]

Family Visits in Health and Social Care Setting: Covid-19 [Col. 411WH]

Future of the National Trust [Col. 435WH]

Pat Finucane [Col. 443WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 35WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
