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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 14 December 2020

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. BORIS JOHNSON, MP, DECEMBER 2019)

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SIXTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 686

EIGHTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2019-2021

House of Commons

Monday 14 December 2020

The House met at half-past Two 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 Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Act 2020

Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Police Officer Numbers

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of police officers. [910154]

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of police officers. [910173]

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of police officers. [910185]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): The Government have a clear commitment to recruit 20,000 police officers by March 2023. Thanks to the strong commitment we have had from all forces across England and Wales, we have made a fantastic start, with almost 6,000 additional officers recruited by the end of September. As the party of law and order, we are well on track to increasing police officer numbers across all forces.

Jack Lopresti: I welcome the increase in police numbers across the country; it is great news, honouring and delivering on our manifesto commitment. I have been informed that Avon and Somerset seems to be lagging behind a bit on the uplift of police numbers. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that that is not the case?

Priti Patel: I can assure my hon. Friend that Avon and Somerset has all the resources needed to recruit the number of police officers that it needs. We have asked it to recruit 137; it has actually recruited 130, and of course we have funded it with up to £326 million. On top of that, I would urge the police force and my hon. Friend to keep on banging the drum—we are the party of law and order—and to get out there and recruit the remaining police officers that it needs.

Gordon Henderson [V]: I am grateful that the Government have provided Kent with an additional 184 police officers, but will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Kent's excellent police and crime commissioner, Matthew Scott, who, in his four years in office, has recruited 450 officers over and above the Government-funded number? That means we now have 3,847 officers in Kent, which is the highest number on record.

Priti Patel: I absolutely commend the police and crime commissioner for Kent, Matthew Scott, but I also thank and pay tribute to the chief constable. This is a

joint effort. Having been out in Kent a few weeks ago on a police raid, I have seen at first hand the new recruits and the absolute determination that the force has not just in recruitment but in dealing with some of the most appalling crimes that we see.

Elliot Colburn: I am delighted that London will also receive an uplift in the number of police officers on our streets. With the continued incidence of catalytic converter theft, vehicle-related crime, antisocial behaviour and burglaries in Carshalton and Wallington, can my right hon. Friend assure me that the London Borough of Sutton will receive its fair share of these new officers?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to bang the drum for the London Borough of Sutton. Of course, he will know that the Metropolitan police has been allocated an additional 1,369 new officers. Its funding has increased as well, by £193 million. I must emphasise that that is money for the frontline—for police officers to deal with the crimes that my hon. Friend highlights, along with a lot of the serious violent crime we see across London.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The Government's police officer uplift is of course welcome, but it must surely be only the starting point for what is needed to repair the damage to policing by Conservative Governments. New figures revealed in *The Sun on Sunday* show that there is now only one police community support officer for every 6,475 people in England and Wales, compared with one PCSO per 3,292 people in 2010. While the population has grown and violent crime has risen by 150%, the Government have cut nearly half of our neighbourhood PCSOs, and on top of that we have lost over 12,000 police staff roles. The Prime Minister said last year that

“the most important thing politicians can do is back the police,”

yet he has zero plans to replace the PCSOs or police staff that have been ripped away. When will this Government live up to their promise so that our police officers can get a grip on crime?

Priti Patel: It is important for this House and the British public to know that this Government have put record levels of funding into the police, and that this Government, this Prime Minister and this Home Secretary absolutely, unequivocally back the police. The hon. Lady asks about the recruitment of PCSOs. Obviously, that links to the powers and the duties that they have, but she will also know that that is a decision for chief constables and police and crime commissioners, so across London, for example, where there might be an issue with PCSOs, it is for her, as a London MP, to raise this with the Labour Mayor of London. These are operational decisions, but I maintain that this Government back the police. Our funding settlement illustrates that day in, day out, as does the recruitment programme, with almost 6,000 new police officers recruited to the frontline.

Mr Speaker: Rosie Cooper is mobile at the moment—hopefully we will come back to her question—so we now move on to the next question.

Covid-19: Public Order

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to maintain public order during the covid-19 outbreak. [910157]

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What representations she has received on the policing of protests against covid-19 restrictions. [910162]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): Our police forces face unprecedented challenges and have the critical role of maintaining public order. They will continue to engage, explain and encourage people to follow the rules, but will enforce where necessary. We have provided £30 million extra surge funding to support additional enforcement and we continue to work closely with our policing partners to ensure they have the necessary powers.

Craig Whittaker [V]: There are widespread reports in West Yorkshire of people breaking restrictions when in gyms. This is incredibly frustrating for pubs that are forced to close, with many on the brink of extinction. Can my hon. Friend reassure those pubs, which are watching from the sidelines, that the same robust approach will be applied in all settings?

Kit Malthouse: I know my hon. Friend has a background as a former publican and that his local pubs are very dear to his heart as a key plank of his local communities. We have done everything possible economically to try to support them, but he is quite right that we should, where at all possible, try to maintain a level playing field in terms of enforcement. He will know that the responsibility for enforcement indoors largely falls to local authorities, environmental health and trading standards, but his question today is a good reminder to everybody involved in enforcement that it must not only be fair, but be seen to be fair.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Has the Minister seen some of the quite shocking footage of the policing of demonstrations that is available online, and is he aware that the police have been visiting restaurants and demanding people's names and addresses? What is happening to our country?

Kit Malthouse: I know my right hon. Friend is not given to hyperbole and that he has expressed his concern about the enforcement regime around the regulations over some weeks now. The enforcement from place to place is obviously an operational matter for the chief constable in that particular locality, but we are trying, where at all possible and in close conjunction with the National Police Chiefs Council, to maintain a sense of fairness and proportionality, using the “Four Es” where we can. I would just point him to the very small number of enforcement notices that have been handed out against the vast population of the United Kingdom—only in the tens of thousands against a population of 65 million—which shows that encouraging the British people to follow the regulations is largely working.

UK Immigration System: Devolved Administrations

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the devolved Administrations on the UK's immigration system after the transition period. [910158]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): The new immigration system will deliver a vision of success for the whole of our United Kingdom, as outlined to Members of the Scottish Parliament on Thursday. The key new routes under the points-based system, including the flagship skilled worker route, are already open for applications. The Home Office regularly engages the devolved Administrations, Parliament and Assembly as we take this work forward.

Neale Hanvey [V]: Ending free movement will have a profound negative impact on Scotland's public services, not least NHS Scotland. Previously, the Home Office team met quarterly with Scotland's migration Minister, but the last meeting took place in July 2019. Since the Minister took up his post, there have been no further meetings. Why is he repeatedly refusing to have those meetings?

Kevin Foster: From the tone of the hon. Gentleman's question, I can only conclude that he missed my appearance before the Scottish Parliament's Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee on Thursday. Perhaps he might find the video online. During the session I outlined several meetings I would be delighted to have with Scottish Cabinet Secretaries and the kettle is on if they want to take me up on the offer.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I find that a fascinating reply, Mr Speaker, because it does not really accord with my understanding of what happened at the meeting to which the Minister refers. The UK Government's immigration policies threaten to plunge Scotland's working-age population into decline, to cause serious staffing shortages in key industries such as the farming industry, and to inflict lasting damage on our public services. The Minister has appeared to dismiss these serious concerns and has point blank refused to meet the Scottish Government Minister with responsibility for migration since he came into office under this Prime Minister. Did I correctly understand his previous comment as saying that that position has changed? If so, when is he planning to meet the Scottish Government's migration Minister?

Kevin Foster: It is unfortunate that the hon. and learned Member appears also to have missed the session, but again, I believe there is a video online—she might find it fascinating—with me giving examples of Scottish Ministers I was prepared to meet to discuss a range of issues. I also gave MSPs examples of how Scotland's needs are directly shaping the future immigration system for the whole of our UK, including the change to the permit-free festival system directly driven by the needs of Edinburgh international festival. But I suspect the actual focus of this question is, as always from the SNP, pushing separatism, not success for Scotland.

Joanna Cherry: The Minister would do well to appreciate that the SNP represents the majority of voters in Scotland. At the meeting last week that he is referring to, my understanding, from speaking to colleagues, is that he said he would not be meeting what he described as the SNP's "migration spokesperson", so can he now put this on the record? Will he meet my colleague and friend, the democratically elected SNP Government's

spokesperson for migration? Will he meet him, as he has refused to do since last summer—yes or no? It is a very simple question; I want a clear yes or no answer.

Kevin Foster: I regularly meet the SNP spokesperson in this place on migration matters for constructive discussions. This Government are going to focus on building a future migration system focused on ensuring that the world's talent sees Scotland at the heart of our United Kingdom as its natural home. The SNP sees it as an opportunity to ensure that the Scottish Government can always seek to recruit care workers at the legal minimum wage and as a chance to fulfil their ambition to rebuild Hadrian's Wall and get England to pay for it.

Knife Crime

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What steps she is taking to tackle knife crime. [910159]

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce knife crime. [910167]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): We are surging police capacity in the forces most affected by violent crime. We have just consulted on serious violence reduction orders, which would make it easier for the police to stop and search individuals previously convicted of knife crime. We are also investing millions in early intervention to stop young people being drawn into violence in the first place.

Matt Western: In Warwickshire, knife crime has risen by 300% since 2014. Just this year, on 15 January in Leamington Spa, we had one murder and one attempted murder—both stabbings. On 28 May, we had one murder—a stabbing. On 12 November, we had a stabbing, with serious injuries. The Government claim that we have as many officers as we did in 2010. We do not. We are about to lose 125 posts in Warwickshire—police, intelligence officers—so does the Minister understand why the public no longer trust the Government with law and order?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman is rightly concerned about knife crime in his constituency, as am I. While he again seeks to make a connection between police numbers and the level of crime—an argument that was made endlessly before the election—I point out, as somebody who paid a leading role in the battle against the last surge in knife crime, between 2008 and 2012, when police officer numbers were at an all-time high, particularly in London, that the connection is not direct. However, there is much more that we can and will do on knife crime. Although absent the covid effect on crime, we are seeing some signs of a turn in the current surge in knife crime, there is still much more to do in his constituency, as there is across the country.

Huw Merriman: I acknowledge the work that the Minister did while he was working for the Mayor of London to tackle knife crime, reducing numbers, but also in the last year, with a welcome reduction of 19% in knife crime offences. Of course there is more to do. Every life lost is a life wasted and a family ruined, and we must do more. I was very supportive of the introduction

of knife crime prevention orders, and I would be grateful if the Minister could tell me how many orders have been issued since the trials were rolled out this spring.

Kit Malthouse: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his concern about this issue, which affects his constituency as it does many others, and he is right to raise it. Unfortunately, the introduction of knife crime prevention orders, which were scheduled to come in in London, has not yet happened, largely because of the impact of the covid pandemic and the absorption of capacity. However, there has been very significant activity on this issue, not least three weeks ago with a national week of intensification of Operation Sceptre, the anti-knife crime operation, which saw 2,005 arrests and well over 10,000 knives taken off the streets in the space of one week. That is an indication of the scale of the problem to which we are addressing ourselves with some urgency.,

Asylum System Reform

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): What plans her Department has to reform the UK's asylum system. [910160]

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What plans her Department has to reform the UK's asylum system. [910165]

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): What plans her Department has to reform the UK's asylum system. [910169]

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What plans her Department has to reform the UK's asylum system. [910176]

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): What plans her Department has to reform the UK's asylum system. [910186]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): As the Home Secretary has already announced, we will embark next year on one of the biggest ever reforms of our asylum system. The system is in need of fundamental reform in which the principles will be firmness and fairness—fair in that we will rapidly grant claims that are meritorious, but firm in the sense that, where claims do not have merit, we will rapidly refuse them and ensure that people cannot have endlessly repeated bites of the cherry, which sadly is the case at the moment.

Peter Gibson [V]: We are all rightly proud of the UK's history as a safe haven for the persecuted, but can my hon. Friend outline what steps his Department is taking to ensure that claims of asylum from unsafe countries are being prioritised over those from inherently safe countries such as France?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. The United Kingdom's resettlement scheme aims to take people directly from dangerous conflict zones, such as those around Syria, into the United Kingdom. We have run the biggest resettlement scheme of any country in Europe over the last five years. In terms of preventing claims from safe countries, he will be aware

that we introduced some inadmissibility rules a few days ago, and we are working with our French colleagues to prevent these very dangerous small boat crossings from France to the UK. Thanks to that work, I am pleased to be able to report to the House that over the last three months since September, the number of small boat crossings per calm-weather day has come down by over 60%. That is testament to the great work being done by UK officers and by our colleagues in France as well.

Chris Green: It is immensely important that asylum seekers and refugees received the welcome and support they need when seeking sanctuary in the United Kingdom, but does my hon. Friend agree that those who are rejected should leave the country promptly?

Chris Philp: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. Where an asylum claim has been rejected, it is only right and fair that the person whose claim has been rejected should leave quickly. Sadly, that is not always the case. In fact, we are currently accommodating some thousands of failed asylum seekers at public expense, but it is right that they should leave when their asylum claim has been rejected. One of the problems is that repeated appeals and last-minute claims can go on almost without limit and we intend to legislate in the first half of next year to ensure that that breakdown in process—that breakdown in the system—no longer happens.

Caroline Nokes [V]: The failure to manage the backlog of asylum claims has led to the Minister planning open prison-style camps in temporary accommodation in unsuitable locations, remote from healthcare services. Can he explain to the residents of Barton Stacey how the changes laid to the immigration rules last week are going to help? Does he not run the risk of establishing a separate tier of asylum seekers who cannot have their claims processed but cannot be returned to any European Union country because no agreement exists to enable that to happen? And does that mean that they will be permanently stuck in limbo?

Chris Philp: The large numbers being accommodated are to some degree a consequence of covid because, as my right hon. Friend will know, we have been running significantly lower levels of move-ons for people whose asylum claims have been decided. For example, no negative cessations are happening at all at the moment, and that has led to a significant increase in the number of people being accommodated. As we move out of coronavirus next year, we hope to get those numbers rapidly back down again.

In relation to my right hon. Friend's question about the immigration rules, they are laying the foundations for our post-transition period system. As she knows, we are currently in the Dublin system, which provides for people who have claimed asylum elsewhere to be returned to those countries, including France, Germany and Spain. It is our intention to open discussions with those countries as soon as we are able to do so, in order to bring into force similar measures after the transition period ends.

Aaron Bell: My hon. Friend will be aware that approximately 60,000 people are currently stuck in our asylum system. Does he agree with me and my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme that we must get this reform

through, not only to treat those people fairly but to treat the taxpayer fairly? We should not be picking up the tab for a bloated and broken system.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend puts it perfectly. It is unfair on the taxpayer to have people whose claims have been rejected still subsisting in accommodation, and it is unfair on people with meritorious claims, whose claims take longer to hear because the system is not operating in the way it should. We certainly will be reforming it to address the issues he is rightly raising, and he can look forward to supporting legislation in this House in the first half of next year to do exactly that.

Gareth Bacon: The law on asylum is dated and complex. Loopholes have been exploited for many years and, as my hon. Friend has stated on many occasions, tougher legislation is required. Will he advise the House as to when that legislation will be presented?

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. As I said, we will be introducing legislation in the first half of next year. It will aim to be fair to people with meritorious claims, to make sure that their claims are decided quickly and they are properly looked after. For people who have no valid claim or who seek to bring repeated, vexatious claims, often at the last minute, in order to frustrate removal, we will be shutting down those avenues, which are being abused. This is to make sure the system works fairly for those who need protection, but prevents abuse.

County Lines Drugs Networks

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to tackle county lines drugs networks. [910161]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): We are determined to dismantle county lines, which is why we are investing £25 million over two years to surge our law enforcement response to these ruthless criminal gangs. This includes investment in the national county lines co-ordination centre, targeted operational activity in three major exporting police force areas, and increased disruption on the road and rail network.

Harriett Baldwin: With schools often having to send children home this year, very vulnerable young people have been preyed upon by these terrible gangs. Will my right hon. Friend welcome the decision of West Mercia's police and crime commissioner, John Campion, to commission the Children's Society to provide extra help and diversionary activities for these young people?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend rightly recognises that these gangs particularly prey on and target vulnerable children when they are outside the school environment, often those who have, sadly, fallen out of school and cease to attend. So initiatives such as the one she outlines sound absolutely on the money in terms of the type of work we need at a granular level in constituencies across the country. Having worked with the Children's Society as a Back Bencher, I know what enormous value and experience it can bring to these efforts, and I applaud the efforts of her local PCC to do this.

End of Transition Period: National Security)

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the potential effect of the end of the transition period on national security. [910163]

The Minister for Security (James Brokenshire): The safety and security of our citizens remains our priority. We are working closely with operational partners to ensure we are ready for a range of scenarios at the end of the transition period. We will continue to co-operate with European and international partners to tackle shared security threats.

Angela Crawley [V]: The deputy assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan police has pointed out that losing access to EU databases such as the Schengen information system will move the average time for securing a criminal conviction from six days to 60 days, describing this as a "capability gap" and as having a "massive impact". In the event of a no-deal Brexit, what emergency contingency plans does the Department have in place until—possibly—replacements for the existing cross-border arrangements are agreed?

James Brokenshire: National security remains our absolute priority. This country is a safe country and will remain so after the end of the transition period. The hon. Lady asks what alternative arrangements are in place. Obviously, we continue the negotiations and await their outcome, but we are prepared for a range of scenarios. In the event that it is not possible to reach an agreement, the UK has well developed and well rehearsed plans in place. They involve transitioning co-operation with EU member states to alternative, non-EU arrangements by the end of the transition period. These are tried and tested mechanisms, which the UK already uses with so many other countries.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): The Minister recently wrote to me that, in the event of no deal on policing and security co-operation, the UK would fall back on non-EU arrangements. Does he agree with the former National Security Adviser's comments this weekend that these fallbacks are all "slower and more clunky" and that they would leave us all less safe? Moreover, when the current head of UK Counter Terrorism Policing said that we need an agreement that retains or improves levels of co-operation, can the Minister promise the police, the Security Service and, most importantly, the British public that this Government will deliver precisely that?

James Brokenshire: I have already said that this country will remain one of the safest places in the world. It is worth underlining to the hon. Gentleman that the UK will continue to be a global leader on national security; we are now and we will remain so in the future. I hope that, equally, he will note the level of preparedness and the hard work by our police and all our other agencies to ensure that we are well prepared for the end of the transition period to give that assurance to the public over their safety and security and welfare and wellbeing, which absolutely remain a priority for this Government.

Shopworkers: Protection from Assault

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent steps she has taken to protect shopworkers from assault. [910164]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): Mr Speaker, before I answer the question, may I apologise to you and to the House for having used the word “granular” in my previous answer? If it is not unparliamentary language, then it ought to be.

The Government’s response to the call for evidence on violence and abuse towards shopworkers was published in July. We are working with retailers on a programme of work to drive down this crime. We are developing communications materials to give the message that abuse is not tolerated, encouraging retailers to report these crimes and provide better support to victims.

Daniel Zeichner: Like many colleagues, I support USDAW’s Freedom from Fear Campaign and recently visited and met staff at my local Co-op. I was astonished to hear that, across its 12 stores in Cambridge, some 3,000 incidents have been reported already this year. That is an incident in every store every day, so how much worse does it have to get before the police take this more seriously and the Government take some action?

Kit Malthouse: I join the hon. Gentleman in being appalled at the level of abuse and, indeed, violence that shopworkers often face. We are doing a huge amount to try to deal with it. Along with the retail crime steering group, we are working closely with police forces to press down on this particular issue. I have written to all chief constables in recent months outlining the need to ensure that every crime that takes place in a shop is investigated as much as it possibly can be. Interestingly, just last week, I met the head of security at the Co-op to talk about the work that it is doing with a company called Facewatch, which is using facial recognition technology to alert staff to repeat offenders who are entering the store, allowing them to intervene before the interaction is likely to become violent and abusive.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): In a recent survey of its members, the shopworkers’ trade union USDAW found that 85% had been verbally abused, 57% had been threatened and 9% had been assaulted this year. Given those shocking statistics and noting the unsung role that these retail staff have played in ensuring that shops remain open during the pandemic, does the Minister agree that they need greater protection, and does he support the private Member’s Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), which seeks to create new offences for assaults on retail workers?

Kit Malthouse: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman that shopworkers deserve all the protection that we can afford to them in the conduct of their duty, which has never been more crucial than during the recent pandemic and the lockdown where we saw the critical part that they play in making sure that the nation is fed. Having said that, we do not yet see the case for a specific offence of assault on a shopworker, notwithstanding the fact

that conviction for an assault on those performing a public service—a category that such workers would fall into—is already an aggravating factor in sentencing. The Sentencing Council is, I gather, shortly to begin its work in reviewing the sentencing of assault. I urge the hon. Gentleman, with whom I have discussed these matters many times, to put his evidence into that consultation, as will the Government, to ensure that those who assault people working in a retail environment receive a commensurately serious offence such that others will be deterred from doing the same.

Covid-19: Domestic Abuse

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): What steps the Government plan to take to protect domestic abuse victims in response to the increase in domestic abuse incidents during the covid-19 outbreak. [910170]

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Government plan to take to protect domestic abuse victims in response to the increase in domestic abuse incidents during the covid-19 outbreak. [910177]

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to protect victims of domestic abuse. [910178]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Throughout the covid-19 pandemic, we have provided unprecedented additional funding to domestic abuse service providers to bolster their capacity to meet the demand for support. We announced further funding last month and relaunched the #YouAreNotAlone campaign to ensure that victims of abuse and those worried about them know how to access help and advice. In addition, the police continue to target perpetrators of abuse proactively because there is no excuse for abuse.

Sarah Owen [V]: We know that domestic abuse helplines have seen a significant increase in calls for help this year, especially during lockdowns, but we also know that there are many people who have struggled to access domestic abuse support, even before the pandemic. Hearing from local campaigners such as Dr Nazia Khanum in Luton, it seems that people just are not getting the support needed because of additional barriers such as finances, language, culture and having no recourse to public funds. What are the Government doing to ensure that domestic abuse support gets to those who are hardest to reach?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady will of course be aware of the groundbreaking Domestic Abuse Bill, which has passed its scrutiny in the House of Commons and awaits its scrutiny in the House of Lords. As part of that Bill, we have an extensive programme of work—not just in the Bill itself, but outside the Bill—to help support victims. She will know, I hope, that not only have we commissioned the designate domestic abuse commissioner to map the services that are available in the community, but that we are in the process of launching our support for migrant victims scheme, which is a pilot scheme to support victims of domestic abuse who have no recourse to public funds.

Alex Norris: The Minister was wise to make extra funding available in the light of the impact of covid on domestic abuse and sexual violence. However, that money has to be spent, through police and crime commissioners' offices, by support services by March. The support services that I have talked to have said that that is simply not enough time to spend it efficiently and effectively. Will the Minister commit herself today to giving them another year to spend that same money?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising a constructive point. I hope that he knows that we were very keen through the pandemic to help at a local, regional and national level. Indeed, I was very careful to ensure that police and crime commissioners, who are responsible for distributing the local level of funding, do so not just to the services that are commissioned, but also to non-commissioned services, because there is a wealth of expertise across the country. On the point about funding, I will of course take that away. It is something that I have been discussing with charities and I know their concerns; we are dealing with that issue during the spending review allocation process.

David Johnston: Reducing the Risk supports victims of domestic abuse in my constituency and across Oxfordshire, and it was grateful to receive some of the funding that my hon. Friend refers to and which has helped it to support 50% more people. One of the things it focuses on is prevention. Does my hon. Friend agree that although we have to deal with the cases that we have seen spike during this year, we must not lose sight of the importance of prevention so that they do not get to that stage in the first place?

Victoria Atkins: I very much recognise that. Indeed, part of the programme of work that sits within the Bill and outside the Bill is about tackling those who perpetrate domestic abuse. We need to stop these cycles of abuse; sadly, in some cases, perpetrators go from relationship to relationship, abusing and hurting people in their wake. One of the things that I am very interested in—I know that this is also an interest of my hon. Friend—is looking at what more we can do to understand the work of academics, particularly in interesting areas such as the use of artificial intelligence, to see whether we can do better by way of risk assessing domestic abuse perpetrators and the terrible impacts that they can have on their victims.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab) [V]: Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

The Office for National Statistics and Women's Aid data last week revealed that 4,823 victims of domestic abuse were not given refuge in 2018-19 because of a lack of space. That is an increase of 1,200 victims left without a safe place compared with the previous year. The Government may cite the temporary increase in beds hard won by campaigners over the covid-19 crisis, but both the Minister and I know that support services should be for life, not just for covid. I have tried and failed to get refuge beds for victims over the last few weeks. I simply ask the Minister if she is proud of a record of a rising number of victims turned away from life-saving support? Can she guarantee that this figure will fall next year, or will it rise to 5,000 or maybe 6,000 victims turned away?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her support on the Bill, because, as she knows, the introduction of part 4 of the Bill puts particular duties on tier 1 local authorities to provide support services as part of their package of care towards people who are having to live in safe accommodation and refuge spaces. However, we also need to focus not just on refuge spaces. Although those are absolutely critical, as part of our work in the future I very much want us to focus on trying, where safe, to keep victims and children in their homes, with perpetrators being required to leave their home addresses. It is simply unacceptable that someone who has suffered trauma for years and years feels, in moments of crisis, that they must be the ones to leave their home, their family, their friends, their GPs and their schools while the perpetrator gets to stay in the home address. That is wrong. Wherever it is safe and possible to do so, we want to change that culture.

County Lines: Safeguarding

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to tackle county lines drug trafficking and safeguard vulnerable children from exploitation. [910171]

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to tackle county lines drug trafficking and safeguard vulnerable children from exploitation. [910181]

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to tackle county lines drug trafficking and safeguard vulnerable children from exploitation. [910188]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): We are determined to tackle the harm caused by county lines exploitation. In addition to the establishment of violence reduction units, the extensive operations conducted by British Transport Police on transport networks and other targeted policing across the country, this year we have significantly increased our investment in one-to-one specialist support for county lines victims and their families to help them to leave the clutches of these criminal gangs. We are also funding the helpline Safecall run by the Missing People charity, which provides specialist advice and support to young people, parents and professionals who are worried about a young person who may be in trouble and being exploited.

Ms Buck: In my constituency there is one estate where it is believed that at least 20 county lines are being run. We have had a spate of killings this year, including two teenagers, one of whom died only a few weeks ago. Does the Minister think that the loss of over a third of our police services and 80% of our youth services, and the halving of our early intervention services, have helped or hindered in dealing with county lines?

Victoria Atkins: We should be clear that the fault for the terrible facts that the hon. Lady describes in an estate in her constituency lies in the hands of the criminal gangs who are exploiting our children and peddling drugs. It is that demand for those illegal substances that is driving this market force of county line gangs across

the country. She will, I am sure, be delighted about the recruitment of extra officers to the Met. She will also, I am sure, be pleased about the targeted investment that we are putting into one-to-one specialist support for children and young people, including in London. But the message is clear: it is criminal gangs who are responsible for this and we need to work together to drive them out.

Ruth Cadbury: Children in my constituency are also getting unwittingly or unwillingly ensnared by gangs and exploited by them, not only into county lines but other criminal activity. That has a huge impact on them and on their families. In response to this trend, groups such as Action Isleworth Mothers in my constituency have been set up by parents to support other parents and their children who are at risk. What additional support and funding will the Government provide to grassroots groups such as AIM?

Victoria Atkins: I really welcome the sort of intervention that the hon. Lady describes. I am very conscious of the impact that county lines exploitation and, as she says, other types of criminal exploitation have not just on the young people themselves but on their families and their wider neighbourhoods. In terms of the organisation she mentions, I am very happy to meet her to learn more about it. I remind her of the youth endowment fund, which is a fund of £200 million that we have set out over a 10-year period in order to research programmes that work and are evaluated to have really good development and really good conclusions so that we can share that best practice with other local authorities and charities across the country.

Kerry McCarthy: In a recent report, the Children's Commissioner highlighted the risk that young people in care were put in when they go into unregulated and mostly unsupported accommodation, and called for a ban on that. One of the things that they are at risk of is being preyed upon and drawn into county lines activity. Will the Minister speak to her colleagues in the Department for Education, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to see whether they can support my Bill which aims to outlaw this?

Victoria Atkins: I hope the hon. Lady would be content to know that those discussions are already taking place. I take the vulnerabilities of children living in care very seriously indeed. One of the funds, the Trusted Relationships fund, which she may be aware of, is precisely to help children who have perhaps been let down by every adult they have come across in their lives, and I have seen at first hand some of the incredible work that the youth workers are able to do with individuals through that fund. I am certainly happy to meet her and to discuss her Bill with my colleagues.

Topical Questions

[910214] **Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): The Windrush generation helped build the Britain we know and love today. The Windrush compensation scheme is a key part of our efforts to right the wrongs they endured. Today I am announcing

substantial changes to the compensation scheme, so that those eligible will receive more compensation and more quickly. I am increasing the minimum payments for the impact on life to £10,000, with payments starting this week. I am raising the bar for the amount someone can claim for the impact on their life to £100,000, with exceptional cases able to receive more. The changes under the terms of the scheme will apply retrospectively and together will make a real difference to people's lives. I have always promised to listen and act to ensure that the victims of Windrush have received the maximum amount of compensation they deserve, and it is my mission to correct the wrongs of the past. I will continue to work with the Windrush working group to do exactly that.

Ben Everitt: At this time of year, there is only one person we want sneaking into our houses, and he wears a red suit, so perhaps the Home Secretary will join me in congratulating Thames Valley police on their recent week-long anti-burglary operation, which resulted in 88 arrests, meaning that Father Christmas has a longer naughty list, but the homes of Milton Keynes and the rest of the Thames valley are safer this festive season.

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for that. He will know the strength of support I have for Thames Valley police force in particular and the exceptional work they have done and do. I commend them for their work, particularly on burglary. I want to wish everybody a happy Christmas, and a safe and secure Christmas to all members of the public.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I open by thanking the many neighbourhood police officers who did so much work last month visiting schools in support of the vital message of Anti-Bullying Week. I am sure all Members of the House would agree with that message and with teaching the importance of upholding those values, yet we have a Home Secretary in office who has been found to have broken the ministerial code by bullying. What signal does the Home Secretary think that sends to victims of bullying all around the country as to whether they should come forward?

Priti Patel: First, as the House will know, I have already made an apology to those I have inadvertently upset, and I have also made it clear that I am now getting on with delivering on the people's priorities.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The truth is that the whole episode shows a Government who have lost sight of their moral compass. The Prime Minister's former distinguished adviser on ethics, Sir Alex Allan, found that the Home Secretary had breached the ministerial code for the second time, yet he is the one who loses his job. It sends the most terrible signal to victims in workplaces and schools around the country. Let us be clear: this has happened in the context of chronic failure, with violent crime rocketing across the country, conviction rates at record lows and domestic abuse charities struggling to keep their doors open. It has taken two and a half years for the Government to consider any meaningful action on the offensive mess that is the Windrush compensation scheme. Is not the truth under this Government that it is one rule for the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and their friends, and another for everybody else?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman can carry on with his belittling personal attacks, which will actually make me more determined than ever to deliver on the issues that I am focused on and the people's priorities—the people's priorities that got this Government elected a year ago: to deliver 20,000 more police officers and to deliver on the immigration changes that his party still implacably opposes.

Let us not forget about the victims of the Windrush compensation scheme. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the scandal of Windrush dates back many decades, under many other Governments. It is this Government who are fixing the wrongs of the Windrush issue but also delivering in terms of compensation to the victims and ensuring that more victims of that scheme come forward. As he heard in my opening remarks, I will continue to pursue that. We will learn the lessons of the past, and at the same time we will continue to work with everybody across the Windrush taskforce to ensure that the wrongs of the past are righted.

[910219] **Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend know when the Labour party decided to start standing up for the convicted criminals like murderers and rapists that this Government are trying to deport, rather than the victims of crime and law-abiding members of the British public?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Once upon a time, the Labour party claimed that it was tough on crime and the causes of crime, but, quite frankly, this is quite disgraceful. I am sure that his postbag has mirrored mine over recent weeks. The British public are shocked and appalled that the Labour party now stands up for the murderers, the rapists and the sex offenders and is not doing the right thing when it comes to ensuring that foreign national offenders are removed from our country. The Conservative party is the party of law and order, and we will continue to do the right thing and keep the British public safe. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) finds that funny and has to laugh at that.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the Windrush announcement; we look forward to seeing the detail. Last week, the National Audit Office report said that the Home Office plans to remove all SIS II—second generation Schengen information system—data from the Warnings Index, Semaphore and Border Crossing systems on 31 December. Can the Home Secretary confirm that that means the Government will be removing or deleting from our border systems the details of more than 40,000 criminals and suspects wanted abroad?

The Minister for Security (James Brokenshire): The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee highlights the issue of the ability to share data with our international partners. Obviously, our Interpol relationship predates our SIS II access, and that will provide us with the means to communicate with all our international partners quickly and securely. All incoming Interpol circulations— Notices and diffusions, as they are called—are uploaded to UK border and policing systems to ensure our security.

[910222] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I believe that the Immigration Minister recently met members of the National Farmers Union

of Scotland to discuss the labour needs of Scotland's farmers. Can the Home Secretary update the House on the seasonal workers scheme for 2021?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right: the Immigration Minister did have meetings. He will understand that the Government are rightly looking at and reviewing the needs of the agricultural sector and the seasonal agricultural workers pilot, which he and many other colleagues have made representations on. The Immigration Minister and I are working across Government to meet those needs while getting the balance right for future employment opportunities for British workers in our country.

[910215] **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) [V]: As alluded to earlier, the Home Office has just made some extraordinary immigration rule changes that are completely at odds with the refugee convention and could see almost every asylum seeker in the UK left in limbo or removed to a country they have never even been near. Why will someone in the Department not have the courage to make a full statement to the House, so that MPs can properly scrutinise these drastic changes before they come into force in January?

Priti Patel: It is absolutely right that we have made changes to our immigration rules. I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that when it comes to illegal migration and the issues that we face, too many people are putting their lives at risk by crossing the channel in unseaworthy vessels—and they are putting not only their lives at risk but the lives of Border Force officers as well. We are determined to make that route unviable, and these rule changes are part of that.

[910223] **Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): Over the last few months, there has been a spate of vehicle thefts across High Peak, including in Glossop, Hadfield, Chapel-en-le-Frith and New Mills. I am grateful to Inspector Dave Parker and the local police for their proactive efforts to tackle that problem, but more resources are needed. I was proud to stand on a manifesto promising to recruit an additional 20,000 police officers. Can the Home Secretary assure me that Derbyshire will get its fair share of those extra officers as soon as possible?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise his concerns. He has raised the issue of crime and the implications of disorder for his local community, and he is right. I can confirm that his police force has recruited 72 additional police officers, and of course that number is going to go up and up in line with our commitment to recruit 20,000 more police officers.

[910229] **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend agree to consider the reclassification of psychoactive substances such as Monkey Dust that have had such a damaging effect on lives and communities in Stoke-on-Trent?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point to and highlight the devastating impact of drugs such as Monkey Dust. I have visited his constituents in the past and we discussed these issues. The Government absolutely recognise the corrosive harm that these drugs do. Of course, there are penalties for supplying these

drugs—penalties of up to 14 years in prison and unlimited fines. At this moment, we are keeping drug classification under review, and of course we do that taking into account all the harms and the impact of these drugs on individuals and our communities.

[910221] **Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): I welcome the Government's recent funding commitment to extend the work across England and Wales to manage and change the behaviour of abusive perpetrators, yet I note with concern that these funds have to be spent by March 2021. This clearly does not leave much time to introduce the vital measures that are desperately needed to end domestic abuse. As the Minister has herself said today, it is vital that we reach perpetrators before they have a chance to abuse again, so what plans do the Government have to keep holding perpetrators' feet to the fire with projects for the long term?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting that investment. She makes a point about the timeframe in which the money was granted by the Treasury, but this is a programme of work that we are taking forward throughout the next few years. She will understand that there are spending review allocation decisions to be made at the moment, but we are clear that we want to continue tackling this abusive behaviour.

[910232] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The new emergency services network, which is being delivered by EE, is clearly vital for our emergency services, but also for the improvement of mobile phone services in rural areas. However, it is well behind schedule and way over budget. Is there anything the Home Secretary can do to bring that back on track?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—this programme is incredible late on delivery and well over budget. In fact, this House has given this programme a great deal of scrutiny, and rightly so. There is no apology for that; the failings are on the record. We are now working at pace, clearly, to deliver on this. It is a really important programme. The Policing Minister and others are working with police forces now to get this plan implemented. We want this to work, and, as my hon. Friend has highlighted, I am afraid that too much time has passed and too much money has been lost and wasted. This is a classic example of procurement and big projects not working. We have got to fix this and sort this out.

[910224] **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab) [V]: Earlier this month, eight Commonwealth-born British Army veterans lost their legal battle to remain in the UK, leaving the men in fear of destitution and deportation. The Home Secretary has the power to end their ordeal, so will she now commit to granting the veterans the right to stay in the country they so bravely fought for?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I pay tribute to those individuals who have served our country. I think it is important that the hon. Gentleman knows and the House is aware of the fact that I am currently working with the Secretary of State for Defence on these very cases; we are both looking at this. There will be future announcements coming forward. However,

I am well aware of these individual cases—how these individuals have been treated, and the cases and the representations they are making right now—and, quite frankly, we want to correct this.

[910225] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): I welcome the Windrush announcement, but the Windrush scandal was just the most extreme example of the indifference and rank incompetence endemic in today's Home Office. Delays and charges are escalating, documents are not returned and often lost, and correspondence takes forever—whether to claimants or, indeed, to their Members of Parliament. Rather than make repetitious speeches about how tough they are going to be, why do Ministers not address the public's priorities, as the Home Secretary has said, roll up their sleeves and get a grip of this dysfunctional Department?

Priti Patel: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. He mentioned Windrush and the Department's inefficiencies of the past, and there are a couple of points that I want to make. Windrush was a stain—let us face it—on the Department and the Government, and we are now working through that; we want to right the wrongs. I hear what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. Do not forget that Wendy Williams's report basically pointed to the ignorance and thoughtlessness about race and the history of the Windrush generation in the Department, but he refers to something much wider—he has raised this point with me numerous times—which is that we must not treat people like cases. That is a fundamental change that I am trying to bring to the Department. It is taking time, and there is no quick fix. I give him every single assurance that I will continue to work night and day to change our systems and make sure we put people first.

[910240] **Colleen Fletcher** (Coventry North East) (Lab): There has been a spate of catalytic converter thefts in Coventry, with more and more vehicles being targeted by thieves. These crimes cause distress and disruption to victims. Will the Home Secretary tell me what steps the Government can take in conjunction with the motor industry and other partner agencies to reduce the theft of catalytic converters, which seems to be a growing problem?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Of course, the long-term answer is to work with the industry, as we are doing, to design out many of those problems and issues. That is about the changing nature of vehicles. The fact of the matter is, as we have already heard from colleagues, that the theft of vehicles or catalytic converters is damaging and blights people's lives. That is why we are resourcing the police and supporting them in every effort to go after the criminals behind this.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): There is great concern in the far south-west that daffodil growers will not be able to access the workforce they need to pick this year's crop. The peak of the season is literally days away. We welcome the successful pilot of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, but there is concern that it will not be in place quickly enough or that it will not provide enough staff for flower pickers this winter. Will the Minister update the House on when the scheme will be fully rolled out, and will he ensure that our flower pickers get the staff they need?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): I recognise the importance of the issue. We are looking to continue the seasonal workers pilot into 2021. As the Home Secretary said a few moments ago, we will confirm the numbers shortly, but it is worth remembering that the restrictions on international travel may well affect the number who actually travel, as they did this year.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Highly talented students are often attracted to our universities in the hope that their degree leads to enhanced employability in the UK, yet competitor countries such as Canada and Australia offer longer, and therefore more attractive, post-graduation work visas. Will the Government help our universities to remain competitive by further extending the post-study work visa to three or four years for undergraduate and masters students?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady has rightly highlighted how incredible, fantastic and outstanding our universities are in this country. We are in a global competition when it comes to international talent, and the Government fully recognise that. That is why we now have the two-year post-study visa route. Of course, all our policies remain under review. There are routes that went live in October under the new points-based system, and we will continue to look at them and how they develop. Let me be clear that we want the brightest and best coming to this country, and our immigration system is enabling that.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): As the Home Secretary knows, Newport West is a diverse and multicultural part of south Wales. My constituent and I want to know what plans she and her colleagues across Government have to convene engagement events with

at-risk communities? Those are the very people we need to be involved in putting together a fully costed plan to tackle hate crime online and in person once and for all.

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the issue of online crime, online abuse and hate crime. Frankly, appalling and personal attacks are now prevalent across society. Associated with that, we have a wide range of engagement taking place, not just with our Department but with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. That is in line with our review of online harms, and there will be future announcements about that. As the hon. Lady is well aware, legislation is coming.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The rail to refuge scheme run by the train operators is highly successful in supporting victims of domestic abuse and their children, but it will expire in March 2021. Will the Government please look at reviewing the scheme to ensure that they protect all victims?

Victoria Atkins: This is a really interesting scheme. As the hon. Lady knows, it was launched in March and, since then, on average four people a day have used it. I understand that early in 2021 the Department for Transport will review its continuation beyond March. I hope that, as with all our departmental questions, the message to victims of domestic abuse is clear: in the pandemic they can still leave their homes if they need to seek help.

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

3.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update

3.38 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on coronavirus. We are nearing the end of such a tough year where the British people have united and had to make so many sacrifices for the common good. I know the whole House and the whole country have been cheered by the progress we have seen in the last few weeks, which means we can now roll out the vaccine programme that will ultimately set us free.

I can tell the House that, today, the NHS has begun vaccinations through GPs in England and in care homes in Scotland. Day by day, we are giving hope to more people and making this country safer. It is life-saving work. However, it will take time for its benefits to be felt far and wide, so we must persevere because the virus remains as dangerous as it has always been.

Average daily hospital admissions are up 13% and the latest figures show that average daily cases have risen by 14% in the last week. As before, the rise and spread is not even across the country. We are seeing a sharp rise in south Wales, in London and in parts of the east and south-east of England. This is a trend that we are also seeing in other parts of Europe, in countries such as Sweden, where nearly all the intensive care beds in Stockholm are currently in use; in Germany, where they had to announce tougher new restrictions over the weekend; and in the Netherlands, which today has announced further measures. Until we can vaccinate enough vulnerable people and ensure that they get the second dose so that they are protected, we must act to suppress this virus.

Our strategy throughout, as set out in the winter plan, has been to suppress the virus while protecting the economy, education and the NHS until the vaccine can make us safe. Today, I would like to update the House on the latest steps we are taking in this mission. First, I want to update the House on a new development in the virus itself. Over the past few days, thanks to our world-class genomic capability in the UK, we have identified a new variant of coronavirus, which may be associated with the faster spread in the south-east of England. Initial analysis suggests that this variant is growing faster than the existing variants. We have identified over 1,000 cases with this variant, predominantly in the south of England, although cases have been identified in nearly 60 different local authority areas and numbers are increasing rapidly. Similar variants have been identified in other countries over the past few months.

We have notified the World Health Organisation about this new variant, and Public Health England is working hard to continue its expert analysis at Porton Down. I must stress this point: there is currently nothing to suggest that this variant is more likely to cause serious disease, and the latest clinical advice is that it is highly unlikely that the mutation would fail to respond to a vaccine, but it shows that we have to be vigilant and follow the rules, and that everyone needs to take personal responsibility not to spread this virus.

The first formal review of tiering decisions is taking place this Wednesday, two weeks after the new rules came into force. However, I need to tell the House that over the last week we have seen very sharp exponential

rises in the virus across London, Kent, parts of Essex and Hertfordshire. We do not know the extent to which that is because of the new variant, but no matter its cause, we have to take swift and decisive action. Doing so is, unfortunately, absolutely essential to control this deadly disease while the vaccine is rolled out. In some parts of these areas the doubling time is around every seven days. This is no longer just about rising rates among school-age children, but about rising rates in all age groups, including the over-60s.

We know from painful experience that more cases lead to more hospitalisations and, sadly, the loss of more of our loved ones. Hospitals across the capital, Essex and Kent are already under pressure. We know that the doubling of cases will be mirrored in hospital admissions, and it only takes a few doublings for the NHS to be overwhelmed. Our NHS is straining every sinew to cope with the pressures, as it always does, but if cases continue to double, even it will be overwhelmed.

We must act now to shift the curve, because when the virus is growing exponentially, there is not a moment to spare. We are, therefore, acting ahead of the formal review date. I am very grateful to colleagues at Public Health England, NHS Test and Trace and the Joint Biosecurity Centre, whose surveillance of this virus means that we can act very rapidly when a problem arises. We have therefore decided to move Greater London, the south and west of Essex—that includes Basildon, Brentwood, Harlow, Epping Forest, Castle Point, Rochford, Maldon, Braintree and Chelmsford, along with Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea Borough Councils—and the south of Hertfordshire, which means Broxbourne, Hertsmere, Watford and the Three Rivers local authority, into tier three, the very high alert level.

That means that people can only see friends and family whom they do not live with, or with whom they are not in a support bubble, in outdoor public places and, of course, in line with the rule of six. Hospitality settings must close except for takeaway and delivery, and people should avoid travelling outside their area and reduce the number of journeys they make wherever possible. I know that this is difficult news. I know that it will mean that plans are disrupted, and that for businesses affected it will be a significant blow. This action is absolutely essential not just to keep people safe, but because we have seen that early action can help to prevent more damaging and longer-lasting problems later.

These restrictions will come into force at midnight on Wednesday morning, because when the virus moves quickly we must move quickly too. We must take actions that are not necessarily easy but that are effective. We will continue to stand with those who are most impacted, through our furlough scheme and support for the self-employed. We have already begun to surge mobile testing into these parts of London, Essex and Kent, and we are extending community testing too.

In addition, I can tell the House that this weekend, as part of our expansion of community testing, we are extending it to 67 local authorities across England. Further, today we will be publishing a guide for colleagues to promote, support and champion local community testing and contact tracing. We will be using millions of newly invented tests to reduce the rate of infection in areas where infection is highest and to help them move down through the tiers and closer to normal life.

Thanks to the forces of science, help is on its way. While we know now that that day will come, this is not over yet. While we deploy the fruits of scientific endeavour to keep the country safe, we must do what it takes to protect our loved ones and our NHS now. I know that these steps are hard, but we must not waver as we enter the final stretch, so that when we look back on this time of crisis, we can all say that we played our part. I commend the statement to the House.

3.46 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): As always, I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

This is a virus that, without adequate restrictions in place, spreads with ferocity. Case rates are increasing again, hospital admissions are climbing and the R is edging up. Last week, the England-wide rate was 159 per 100,000; now it is 188 per 100,000. That is a 20% increase. Across London cases have increased by 30% and across the east of England by 36%, so none of us is surprised at the action the Secretary of State is taking today. Indeed, he was warned that tier 2 would not be enough to contain the spread of the virus in many places. Indeed, it looks like in some areas, such as Kent, tier 3 is not enough to contain the spread either.

Elsewhere in the country, tier 3 does appear to be forcing the virus to flatline. Indeed, in the north-west it is trending down. However, overall the increasing areas are rising faster than the decreasing areas are falling. As things stand, we are heading into the Christmas easing with diminishing headroom. The buffer zone that the tiers were supposed to provide is getting much thinner.

What is the Secretary of State's plan to keep people safe through Christmas and avoid huge pressures on the NHS in January? What is his plan to support an exhausted, underfunded, understaffed NHS through January to deliver the care patients will need? Is he confident that our NHS will not be so overwhelmed in January that it impacts on the vaccination programme?

Our response to covid throughout could have been stronger had contact tracing been more effective. In boroughs such as Islington, only 65% of people have been traced by the national system. In Tower Hamlets the figure is only 60% and in Barking it is only 61%, yet Test and Trace is costing £22 billion—more than the policing and fire service budgets combined. According to the National Audit Office, up to September only £785 million was allocated to local council public health teams. Meanwhile, Serco has subcontracted to 21 other firms, offering little training to staff, with some people in call centres sitting alongside others making sales calls for gambling websites. Surely it is time to scrap Serco and put all public health teams in the lead in the retrospective cluster-busting contract tracing we need.

The Secretary of State has promised more testing for tier 3 areas. What about the tier 2 areas? On the lateral flow tests he is rolling out, he will know that some care home providers are refusing to use them because of concerns about their accuracy. Is he satisfied that these tests are accurate enough for this purpose and safe? If they cannot be used for care homes, how quickly can care home residents' relatives make use of polymerase chain reaction tests?

The Secretary of State often praises Liverpool, but is not the biggest lesson to draw from Liverpool that people still struggle to isolate if they do not have the financial means to do so? The eligibility criteria for the £500 payment is still too tightly drawn. People need decent sick pay. People in some circumstances need alternative accommodation. People need help with their shopping and medicines. Surely some of the £22 billion spent on Test and Trace could be reallocated to offer people adequate isolation support.

On the variant that has been identified, our constituents will naturally be concerned.

Will the Secretary of State undertake to keep the House updated throughout? I am grateful for the briefings he has arranged for myself and others with the chief medical officer, but if this variation means the virus is more easily transmissible, fixing contact tracing and isolation becomes even more fiercely urgent.

Finally, today I spoke to Fred Banning. Fred is just 38, has two children under 10 and has terminal cancer. He asks that those with terminal illness are given quicker access to the vaccine, so he can in the words that he said to me this morning “make the most of the time he has left with his family.” I understand that these are clinical decisions, but can the Secretary of State through his offices look into access to the vaccine for those with terminal illness and see what can be done for people such as Fred and many others in this situation?

Matt Hancock: I am glad to say that across large parts of the country there is very good evidence that tier 3 restrictions are working and the rates are coming down, but we need to be vigilant and, as the hon. Gentleman knows, overall rates are no longer coming down, hence we are having to take further action.

The hon. Gentleman talked in particular about the lessons from Liverpool; the primary lesson from Liverpool is that when everybody pulls together and everybody makes the sacrifices that are necessary for their whole community, we can really get this thing under control. I am grateful to colleagues across London and Essex and Hertfordshire, to whom I have been talking today, who are committed to working to ensure that we get the public health messages out first and foremost, and to the Mayor and the Conservative candidate for Mayor, who are both committed to working on behalf of the capital and, of course, those parts of Essex and Kent and Hertfordshire that are affected, because the single best thing that we can all do is speak with one voice about what is needed to get this virus under control.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Christmas, and my recommendation to people is to be cautious and careful. He asked about NHS funding and staffing; of course we have the strongest funding in history for the NHS, and I am delighted to say that we have more nurses in the NHS than ever before—14,000 more nurses than this time last year. I pay tribute to each and every one of them.

The hon. Gentleman asked about contact tracing and no doubt he will have seen the figures published on Thursday, which show that contact tracing now reaches over 80% of contacts. I pay tribute to the team, both local and national, who are ensuring that we can get to more than four fifths of people whom we need to reach, and that has been rapidly improving.

[*Matt Hancock*]

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about Fred, the gentleman with terminal cancer whom he spoke to this morning. Those with terminal cancer are, of course, clinically vulnerable by the nature of that awful disease, and we will ensure that those who are clinically vulnerable get access to the vaccine when clinically appropriate. I am very happy to take up the individual case he raises and ensure that Fred gets a fair deal.

All in all, I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support for the measures we have outlined today and of course for the vaccine programme, which is rolling out across the country right now.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): These are incredibly difficult decisions, but I wholly support them, because the evidence from all over the world is that acting early and decisively is the best way to save both lives and jobs. It would be perverse in the extreme if we were to take our foot off the pedal so close to rolling out the vaccine.

However, may I first ask the Secretary of State about the new strain? He said that it is highly unlikely that the vaccine will not work with a new strain. When will we know for sure? Are any trials going on? Will he get more up-to-date scientific information anytime soon?

Secondly, may I ask the Secretary of State for clarity? With just 11 days before Christmas, lots of people will be thinking about Christmas shopping. From Wednesday, will it be against the regulations for those living outside London to go to Oxford Street to do their Christmas shopping? Will that also be against the regulations for those living inside London? Is the only way legally to do Christmas shopping now to go online?

Matt Hancock: First, on my right hon. Friend's question about the new variant, it is being assessed in Porton Down right now. As I said in my statement, the medical advice that we have is that it is highly unlikely that this new variant will impinge on the impact of the vaccine, but we will know that in the coming days and weeks as the new strand is cultured at Porton Down and then, of course, tests are conducted on it.

My right hon. Friend's question about Christmas shopping is important. It is recommended that people should minimise travel, unless it is necessary, in a tier 3 area, and should minimise travel, unless it is necessary, to a tier 3 area. We have taken this action to try to protect people and to try to slow the spread of this virus, and that is absolutely the right thing to do.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Many public health experts have questioned the use of Innova lateral flow tests for mass community testing, especially as the manufacturer does not recommend them for detecting coronavirus in people who are asymptomatic. The Secretary of State must be aware of the paper from the University of Liverpool, based on his own Department's quality assurance programme, which has raised serious concerns about their accuracy when used in the community testing project in Liverpool. A comparison of lateral flow tests with PCR tests in over 3,000 people revealed a sensitivity of just 48%, meaning that more than half of those with the virus

would be falsely reassured that they were negative. The test even missed 30% of those with a high viral load—those most likely to be infectious.

I understand the wish to use quick tests for case finding, but surely the Secretary of State should now delay rolling them out to 67 other local authorities and should not proceed with plans to spend £43 billion for a test that is so inaccurate. Would it not be better to focus funding on easier and quicker access to PCR tests? With more than half of all positive cases being missed, does he accept that despite the proposal by Baroness Harding, these tests cannot be used to release people who are contacts from isolation? On the basis of that study, the Liverpool health protection board has abandoned plans to use lateral flow tests to check visitors to care homes, so will the Secretary of State be recommending that local authorities and providers should return to PCR testing for care home staff and family visitors to reduce the risk to the most vulnerable residents?

Matt Hancock: I think that this argument against testing is wrong. I think that we should test, test, test, and that is what this Government are doing. We are working very closely with the Government in Scotland, from the same party that the hon. Lady represents, to make sure that we use testing as widely as possible to find people who have this virus. Yes, of course different tests have different characteristics. The lateral flow tests find around 70% of those who are infectious. That means that if we test people who would not otherwise have been tested, we find the positive cases, we can get them to isolate and we can break the chains of transmission. I strongly urge the hon. Lady to go back, to study the details and to back the testing programme that we have in this country.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I fully recognise my right hon. Friend's serious dilemmas—it is not an enviable position—but the application of tier 3 to London raises some questions. I have had long conversations in my borough with public health and the hospitals, and they maintain that the infection rate is now almost exclusively among secondary schoolchildren, who pass it on to their parents—those two least at-risk groups—so the hospitals are not overcrowded, with spare beds in the intensive care units and a very low level of covid patients in the hospitals.

Tier 3 will hammer down on the one area that does control what happens, which is hospitality. The key here, surely, is that doing that will cause people to shift back to their homes, and it is that area that we would worry about, with off-licences selling alcohol late in the evening. Will my right hon. Friend try to seek some kind of flexibility so that these measures target better the real risk and do not just hammer those who have been doing the right thing?

Matt Hancock: We are always open to finding new ways to protect the economy as much as possible and bring the virus under control. I share my right hon. Friend's desire to get it under control and to keep it under control until a vaccine can make us safe, but unfortunately this is no longer just a problem among school-age children in Waltham Forest and north-east London, which it has been until the last week's data. The case rate among the over-60s in Waltham Forest is now over 250 and we are seeing that rising over the last week. We are also seeing rising admissions to hospital.

I have a huge amount of sympathy for everybody affected by these decisions in Waltham Forest, but it is absolutely essential to get this under control now to protect the NHS from being overwhelmed in the future. We must break the inexorable link from cases now to hospitalisations in the future—and, sadly, deaths—by using the vaccine and by testing. Until we can have the vaccine fully rolled out and people inoculated by having their second dose, and until enough vulnerable people have had that second dose and have therefore become inoculated, unfortunately measures like this are necessary.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Health Secretary is fully aware that hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost during the pandemic, which continues to hit our economy. That means a vast number of families and individuals are diving into hardship. Having no heating and no hot water is what many residents across our country will face this Christmas, as they visit food banks. What discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions with regard to reducing the rising level of poverty?

Matt Hancock: We are trying to support the economy as much as possible throughout all these difficult decisions. The extraordinary levels of financial support are a part of that, including the furlough scheme, which has now been extended to the end of March. I, of course, talk to my right hon. Friend the Work and Pensions Secretary regularly to make sure we take the action that is necessary in a way that supports people as much as possible.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, albeit that it contains a lot of very grim news about the virus itself and its effect on many areas. It will be greeted with considerable relief in Harwich, Clacton, Colchester and Uttlesford, where the virus rates are much lower and we will stay in tier 2. Is the message now not that we stay in tier 2 or go down a tier much more by our own efforts—by the efforts of local authorities, with the support of NHS Test and Trace—to make sure we support those who have to isolate and track down and trace those who are spreading the virus? By doing that, and by compliance and forbearance, we can reduce the spread of the virus and help to defeat it so we can get down the tiers.

Matt Hancock: Yes. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Trying to keep the virus under control is in the hands of local authorities and local communities. I would say to everybody in Harwich, and people across the south-east and east of England who have not gone into tier 3 today, that we all still need to work together, be vigilant and effectively do everything we can to stop the spread of the disease, because so many people are asymptomatic—about a third—and never have any symptoms but can nevertheless spread the disease. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for the work he has done in giving me ideas to support colleagues to help in that effort. The links between the national system and local authorities are getting stronger all the time, and I want colleagues to be able to play our part—especially as, through our campaigning, we know our communities well—by getting into communities to spread the message that if we all stick by the rules and we get the testing and contact tracing in, we will be able to keep this under control.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab) [V]: With cases in Devon down to 71 per 100,000 and falling, and covid hospital admissions also falling, will the only reason that Devon does not go into tier 1 this week be because of the shortage of staff and hospital capacity after 10 years of Conservative Government cuts?

Matt Hancock: No. First, there is a record number of NHS staff, thanks to this Conservative Government. There is a record number of nurses—we have 14,000 more nurses. What I say to people in Devon, which is currently in tier 2, but with low rates, is do not take it for granted. Let us all work together and try to get Devon into tier 1. In Exeter, those rates have come down really sharply in the last few weeks. Let us keep working at it, and let us keep those public health messages going in relation to not only coronavirus, but the importance of eating fruit.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): We all know where to go now if we run out of fruit.

My children are desperate to see their grandparents this Christmas, as is the case for many families up and down the country, but in view of these alarming numbers, what we are seeing in the US following Thanksgiving and the constant chopping and changing of rules, which leads to lower compliance and more confusion, although I appreciate that the Secretary of State does not want to be the Grinch, should he be reconsidering the Christmas measures that are in place? Do we risk unnecessary additional deaths in the new year, just as we have light at the end of the tunnel with the vaccine?

Matt Hancock: I would recommend people to exercise caution over Christmas, especially with respect to seeing elderly relatives, who, of course, people are yearning to see. I understand that, but I think it is important that people not only abide by the rules, but take personal responsibility in case they have coronavirus and might be passing it on, but do not have any symptoms and do not know about it.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend will know that I have supported all the measures that have been put in place, and I have put my faith in the Government and the scientists and medical officers. However, I have real worries about Harlow in Essex being put into tier 3, as local hospitality businesses are really struggling and on their knees. I would be grateful if he could explain how further restrictions will curb the disease, given that cases increased in Harlow during the second national lockdown. I understand that the virus has recently stabilised in Harlow and that there has been no rate of increase in the over-60s in the last week. Further to this, the overall increase in cases in Harlow is 12% against a regional average of 40%, so I ask him to consider keeping Harlow in tier 2.

Matt Hancock: Unfortunately, cases are rising in Harlow and in the districts of Essex and Hertfordshire nearby, so we do have to take the action that we are. What I say to my right hon. Friend, who is an incredible champion of Harlow and his local community, is let us work together to get this down, let us work together to get this done and let us work together to try to get Harlow back into tier 2 as soon as possible, not just to save lives and protect the NHS in Harlow, but to give people their livelihoods back.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his update to us on what is happening with covid. As a type 2 diabetic, I will take my vaccine when the time comes for me to take it. We will make sure that others get it before I do, but will the Secretary of State outline the response from the medical community about the reactions to the vaccination and the safety of the drugs for those who feel, in some cases, that it has been rushed through?

Matt Hancock: On the contrary, all the safety checks that are necessary have been carried out and we continue to monitor the roll-out of the vaccine throughout the UK. The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency has done a terrific job on that and continues to do so. For instance, my team and the MHRA were having an update assessment on Saturday morning to check the progress of the first week's roll-out, and I am delighted to say that we are able to keep doing that. I say to the hon. Gentleman and everybody else who wants to see the impact of the vaccine: look at the faces of those who have had their first dose, and how pleased they are to have it and to be able to get that step closer to protection from this awful disease.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I note that Essex and Hertfordshire have been split into two—partly tier 2, partly tier 3. However, Greater London has been treated as one. In central London, our cases are significantly below the national average and, whether this House likes it or not, central London is the powerhouse of our national economy. Will my right hon. Friend tell me why London has been treated differently from Essex and Hertfordshire?

Matt Hancock: As you know, Mr Speaker, we look in great detail and at a granular level at the geographies that these restrictions have to cover. Unfortunately, central London's case rates are rising, and we know that if an area is surrounded by other areas where there are significant increases then those high rates tend to move into that area if it is left out of a set of restrictions. I understand, of course, the impact on the economy, but the very clear public health advice was that London should move together because all areas of London are seeing an increase in rates and we need to stop that.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: The Health Secretary seemed to answer rather dogmatically the question of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) about lateral flow tests. May I say to him that it does seem reasonable that, as a diagnostic for people to self-isolate, the test has validity, but with its very high number of false negatives, is he seriously recommending that this is the first line of defence for people going into our care homes? If he is, it is a very dangerous proposition on his part.

Matt Hancock: It is important that we use the right tests in the right circumstances but with the right other conditions. So for instance, there is clear visitor guidance of which testing is one part, but personal protective equipment is another critical part. The nuanced question of the hon. Gentleman is entirely reasonable, but the thing that I find frustrating is the idea that we should discourage people from coming forward for asymptomatic testing when the task is to find as many people as

possible who have the virus to get them to isolate. Yes, we should ensure that visiting care homes is done as safely as possible—there are health upsides to visiting as well as the challenges posed by the virus—but in terms of asymptomatic testing, I encourage people, where tests are available, to come forward, because that is how we find where this virus is and help to isolate it.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for the roll-out of lateral flow tests across Derbyshire. When he does his reassessment on Wednesday, will he be willing to look at more localised geography, perhaps based around hospital catchment areas, and divide the county of Derbyshire between north and south, rather than use the whole county, which is not a very functional geography on the ground?

Matt Hancock: We are happy to look at the human geographies, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister put it, which is precisely why we have taken the decision today to take parts of Essex and parts of Hertfordshire into tier 3. We also look at the travelling patterns to see where the likelihood of the spread is greatest, and we set out the data on which we take the decision, so I think the answer to my hon. Friend is yes.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Contact tracing in Scotland has led the public health professionals to achieve contact rates of up to 95%. Down here, as we know, the job is handed out to privatised companies such as Serco. Serco has a £400 million contract, which it has subcontracted out to 21 further companies. What assurances does the Minister have that there is sufficient co-ordination across these 21 companies and Serco and that everything is under control, rather than adding further layers of complexity?

Matt Hancock: The good news is that the contact tracing across England is increasing in capacity. It is getting faster and it is finding more and more contacts. The comparison of apples and pears that continues to come from those on the SNP Front Bench does not take into account the fact that if we contact trace in a care home, the contact tracing is much easier, and that if we include that contact tracing in the data, we get different answers. This obsession with “public sector good, private sector bad” has been going on for months and it is just as wrong now as it was six months ago.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: Today's news is deeply sombre, so I ask my right hon. Friend to join me in urging residents of Rutland and Melton to be vigilant because we are also seeing cases rising locally, even in our villages. We have to get rates under control if we are to be decoupled from Leicester city, remain at most in tier 2 in Rutland, and protect ourselves from this new variant. Will he join me in thanking those who are working so hard locally to ready our vaccine hubs in Oakham and Melton for once the vaccine is ready for delivery outside of hospitals?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course; absolutely. I am delighted that we are now vaccinating from over 100 different community settings, as well as 70 hospitals across the UK. It is a tribute to the whole vaccine roll-out team, who have done a magnificent job over the last—I was going to say over the last week that the vaccine has been

rolling out, but it has been weeks and weeks in the planning before then. I would say to residents in Melton and Rutland that we will look at Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland separately when we make the decision on tiering on Wednesday. Those in Rutland who are in tier 2 still need to work at it and do their bit to try to keep Rutland in tier 2, and, of course, hopefully get to tier 1. It is so important that everybody does their bit.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has rightly set out the very stark picture today—not only of the variant, but of the growing pressures, including the pressures that are likely to be placed on our NHS at this critical time. Will he therefore agree, particularly given the crucial supply chains for the vaccine, for PPE and for the 40 million packages of medicine that go back and forth between ourselves and the EU every month, that the talks must continue and we must not end up in a no-deal outcome, which would be absolutely devastating at the most critical time for our NHS and our country?

Matt Hancock: The Prime Minister is working hard to see if we can achieve a deal. I hope that there is movement from the European Union so that we can achieve that, but we are ready for any outcome.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I am obviously very disappointed by the news that London is going into tier 3, but, having seen the data and spoken to Public Health England in London and to the hospitals in my constituency, I am fully aware of the threat that this awful virus continues to present to us all. Hospitality in particular has done so much to become covid-secure, but, sadly, we are where we are. I think of our hospitals and the amazing job that our NHS staff are doing day in, day out, night in, night out. The acute hospital trusts in my constituency are handling covid cases from across London, and one of the major concerns that they have raised with me is the length of time for which staff must isolate after a positive covid contact. I understand that lateral flow testing in hospitals allows staff to return to work safely after five days, rather than 14. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the roll-out of lateral flow tests will be prioritised in hospitals where cases are increasing?

Matt Hancock: The short answer is yes. We are rolling out lateral flow testing to find asymptomatic cases in hospitals right across England. We are always looking for ways to reduce the burden of isolation needed for positive contacts. May I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's leadership? These are difficult decisions and it is difficult to explain to people why these measures are necessary given the impact that they have, but she is quite right to do so. Her analysis is that the best way of London coming through this is by presenting a united front, and all of us working together to get the case rates down; that is how we will best get through this together.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Christmas is often the busiest period for many businesses, particularly in sectors such as retail and hospitality. The uncertainty created by tiering arrangements chopping and changing at days' notice has made trading incredibly difficult, even for those places currently allowed to stay open.

What support will be provided to businesses affected by the tier system in the months ahead to ensure that any closures mandated by the Secretary of State's Department over this vital trading period do not leave their doors closed permanently?

Matt Hancock: We want to support businesses as much as we possibly can. The support that is available—the record sums—has been as outlined by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. That will of course be available to businesses as we go into tier 3.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): We are delighted to have the first vaccinations rolling out in Furness this week, but we know that information is key to understanding and tackling this virus. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend consider adding data to the Government's coronavirus website on the number of people, by cohort, who have been vaccinated and on the number of people who have been infected by this new variant of the virus?

Matt Hancock: Of course, we will be publishing data on the number of vaccinations done—that is important. Meanwhile, let us all keep getting out there to make the case that the best way to keep you, your loved ones and your community safe is by getting vaccinated when the NHS calls.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: Self-isolation is crucial to breaking chains of transmission, but too many people cannot afford to self-isolate when asked to do so, because of the loss of earnings it will mean. In Salford, only 389 out of 1,760 applications for self-isolation payments have been successful to date, meaning that many people are not getting the support they need. Will the Secretary of State now agree to provide everyone who has to self-isolate with the financial support that guarantees they will not be worse off because they have done the right thing?

Matt Hancock: The principle the hon. Lady outlines is exactly the one we are working to. The £500 self-isolation payment for those on low incomes is a very important part of our approach, and I am glad that hundreds of people in Salford have been able to be reached.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend very much for his statement, and I fully understand the difficulties he faces. He will know that I am the Member for West Dorset, a rural seat whose western part is 55 miles away from the commercial centre of Bournemouth, which is the driving force of our tiering in rural Dorset. We have consistently maintained low numbers of cases, and on Friday we had just one person with covid in our county hospital. Although I understand full well that my right hon. Friend has had to consider increasing the tier in different places in the UK today, will he, for Wednesday, consider reductions to tier 1 in areas where that is appropriate, as I believe it is in Dorset?

Matt Hancock: I will look at this extremely closely after my hon. Friend's entreaty. I have been noticing that in both West Dorset and Bournemouth the number of cases has been coming down. I say to everybody: stick at it, stick at the rules and do everything you can to reduce the number of transmissions. That is the most likely way of getting into tier 1.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): It is 12 months since the World Health Organisation told us that this was a pandemic, yet multiple schools in Southwark that have had covid cases have still never had any contact from the Government's tracing system, including one college that has had 20 cases since September. In the face of this new, faster-spreading variant, will the Secretary of State finally fix contact tracing? Or will he continue to leave teachers picking up the pieces and having to work weekends, and the public picking up the bill while Ministers' mates pick up the multimillion-pound contracts, which continue, as today shows, to let us down?

Matt Hancock: If the hon. Gentleman has an individual case of a school in that situation and he could let me know, we will sort that out, because in general the links between local directors of public health and the schools to tackle these sorts of problems are pretty good.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I know the whole House was thrilled at those wonderful images last week of people receiving their vaccines, including at the Royal Stoke University Hospital. Like other hospitals across the country, it has been gearing up for that really emotional moment for months. Like the NHS in general, it has a lot of experience of delivering these vaccine programmes, so will my right hon. Friend assure me that we will roll out this vaccine, and any others that get approved, as quickly as possible and as quickly as manufacturing allows?

Matt Hancock: Yes, that is absolutely the goal. I pay tribute to everybody at the Royal Stoke, and it was wonderful to see some of the examples of those who have been vaccinated. Stoke has been having a rough time of it of late and we need to make sure not only that we get the virus under control, but that that vaccine is rolled out, not just in the city centre, but in communities right across Stoke and Staffordshire.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Secretary of State will know that I have warmed to his performance over the months of this pandemic, and I think he is doing a pretty good job. I think it was the Prime Minister who pushed him into the relaxation around Christmas, so may I warn him that my local hospitals in Huddersfield and Halifax are preparing for an awful surge after Christmas, just at the very wrong time, in January and February, when we do not want that kind of pressure? Will he think again and persuade the Prime Minister to think again about any relaxation of the rules over Christmas, in order to save lives?

Matt Hancock: I urge the hon. Gentleman to say to his constituents that we all need to be careful and take personal responsibility to limit the spread over Christmas. I should also like to thank him for his kind and generous words.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I have always warmly appreciated the energy with which the Secretary of State has successfully prevented our hospitals from being overwhelmed, and I have also backed this amazing vaccine that has now been rolled out. May I ask the Secretary of State about capacity in hospitals? I understand that social distancing requires there to be fewer beds in hospitals at the moment, but will hospitals be able to add more capacity as the vaccine roll-out is completed?

Matt Hancock: I certainly hope so; that is one of the things that we are talking about with the NHS. For now, that is not possible. We of course have extra emergency capacity in the Nightingales, and the testing regime has allowed the NHS to restore many of its services, so that in places such as Worcestershire it is able to carry on with almost all the necessary activity, including the electives and the cancer work, even through this second peak. I pay tribute to the NHS in Worcestershire for the work that it has done, with the support of the testing regime, and I really hope that the vaccine allows that to improve again, once we have got enough of the people who are most vulnerable to this disease vaccinated.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The Nottingham Post website is reporting today that 72 areas in tier 2 now have a higher covid rate than tier 3 Nottingham. Since we came out of the national lockdown and went into tier 3, our situation has improved on all five indicators, but we still do not know whether the improvement is enough to allow us to move down a tier later this week. Will the Secretary of State spell out the thresholds that will be used, and will he commit to publishing the rationale for his decision making?

Matt Hancock: Yes. We have set out what statistics we look at, and we publish the statistics. I think Nottinghamshire, including Nottingham, has done a very good job in getting its cases down.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): My Colne Valley constituents now follow the local data really closely, and they can see that covid rates are thankfully plummeting in Kirklees, thanks to the local action we have been taking. Can the Secretary of State confirm that he will be using this local data at a granular level later this week to decide whether my area can come out of tier 3 restrictions?

Matt Hancock: Yes.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: A recent report has concluded that some of the poorer countries might not get access to vaccines until 2024. If the ongoing roll-out in the western countries is successful and normality starts to return by spring, will the Secretary of State give a commitment that he will resist calls to declare the pandemic over, and accept that a global challenge will remain until all countries have widespread vaccination programmes in place?

Matt Hancock: Thanks to the strength of the UK, we have put more funding into the global vaccination effort than any other country in the world, and I am proud of that fact. Of course we have to work together to ensure that vaccines are available everywhere.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Since the recent national lockdown began, the infection rate in Leeds has fallen from over 400 cases per 100,000 to less than 140 today, and the number of covid patients in hospital has declined by 45% in the past month alone. The Secretary of State will be aware that the city has on balance recommended that Leeds should move from tier 3 to tier 2, because businesses have been terribly affected. I realise that he cannot give an answer today, but does he accept, having assured areas that where they are placed in the tier system will depend on the efforts they make to get the numbers down—Leeds has done a

great job—that the credibility of that statement needs to be reflected in decisions about where the areas are put when they show a dramatic reduction?

Matt Hancock: The right hon. Gentleman has made a typically wise intervention ahead of the decision making on Wednesday as to the wider tiering decisions for the rest of the country.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: The Minister for Care has today indicated that there are 12,500 retired GPs and nurses seeking to help with the roll-out of the vaccination programme. My constituent David is one of them. He is 67 years old, fit and well and keen to do his bit, but the system that he has to log on to in order to apply keeps timing him out. I know that my right hon. Friend is an absolute whizz with apps. Please can he make sure that this one works for people like David?

Matt Hancock: I am thrilled at the number of former clinicians who have come back to support this. In fact, I met some of them when I went to Milton Keynes to see the vaccine being injected. I will look into the little whizzing box that is preventing my right hon. Friend's constituent from applying.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, I asked back in April to have mass testing in Halton—better late than never. I decided to go down to the new mass testing centre at Ditton Community Centre in Widnes in my constituency this morning and have a test, which I am pleased to say was negative. It took 10 minutes, and I had the result back in 30 minutes. When does the Secretary of State expect the vulnerable and elderly to have had their second dose of the vaccine?

Matt Hancock: There has to be a 21-day window from the first vaccine dose to the second. We are aiming to send out invitations so that people can come as close to that 21-day marker as possible. Clinically, the 21 days is a minimum not a maximum, but the goal is clearly on or as close to the 21st day as possible.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): As my right hon. Friend is aware, my constituency is in tier 3, and although there has been a considerable drop in the infection rate, people are still concerned about the roll-out of the vaccine. Can he give an update and an assurance that my constituency will feature in the roll-out in coming weeks?

Matt Hancock: Yes, we are working very hard to get the vaccine to every part of the country, including Cleethorpes. I will look into exactly when the vaccine is arriving in Cleethorpes and get back to my hon. Friend as soon as possible.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State is right that, at this critical moment, we must think about the NHS staff we were applauding on the streets so recently, and we clearly must do everything possible to protect people from the spread of the virus. May I press him to say how the advice for the Christmas period could be strengthened by the Government to minimise transmission? Does he recognise the need for better financial support for the sectors most affected

by the measures that we need, such as hospitality, and particularly for those who have fallen through the gaps in the Chancellor's schemes?

Matt Hancock: With the decision to move areas into tier 3 comes extra financial support, and as I have said several times, we recommend that people exercise personal caution and responsibility over the Christmas period.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con) [V]: The tiering system has worked incredibly well in Ashfield and Eastwood, as rates are down due to the hard work and suffering of my constituents. Could my right hon. Friend reassure me that our hard work, dedication and willingness to do the right thing will be taken into account when deciding what tier we will be in at the end of the week?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend knows from personal experience what this disease can be like. He has been a powerful voice for Ashfield, and I will take his representations into account when we make a decision on Wednesday.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): It is extremely concerning that more than 1,000 cases of the new variant have been identified in the south-east, but I understand that the vaccine still works. Data published by the ONS today shows that the mortality rate will fall by 84% when all over-70s are vaccinated. Could my right hon. Friend tell the House when he thinks that will be and what it will mean for the tiering system?

Matt Hancock: Believe me, I would love to be able to answer that question. We do not know, because it depends on the speed of manufacture of the vaccines and the approval or not of the Oxford vaccine by the MHRA. But the essence of the way that my hon. Friend asks the question is exactly how we are thinking about it in Government.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I echo the request from my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) for Dorset and indeed Bournemouth to be considered to be moved to tier 1. The stats support this, and the hospitality industry would be most grateful. While 2020 has been the most testing of years, 2021 should be different because of the vaccine. My concern is that letting down our guard for five days during Christmas could be very dangerous indeed. Will the Secretary of State review those conditions, which were put together some time ago, and come back to the House to present an updated version so that we do not begin the new year with a third wave?

Matt Hancock: I take my right hon. Friend's views on this very seriously. I would say to everybody in Bournemouth and across the country that the best way they can help their area to go into a lower tier is by exercising personal restraint—not seeing the rules as something to push against but rather acting well within them as much as possible to ensure that this virus does not spread.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks a lot about testing and tracing but far less about isolating. The shadow Secretary of State made important points that I do not think the Secretary of

[Daniel Zeichner]

State addressed. In my city, a couple of weeks ago, only 14 people had received the £500 payment. The reasons why people are not isolating are complicated, but what has gone wrong with the system? It really is not working, is it?

Matt Hancock: I am glad to say that thousands of people are receiving the payment. Of course it is aimed at those on the lowest incomes who need the financial support in order to isolate.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Stoke-on-Trent has now seen our case rate drop to below 300 per 100,000 and boasts one of the highest testing rates in the west midlands. The additional lateral flow tests from the Government, added to the impressive work by Stoke-on-Trent City Council, mean that we can now test up to 25,000 people per week. Does my right hon. Friend agree that community testing will be hugely important in helping areas like Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, and can he confirm when mass vaccination sites in the city will appear?

Matt Hancock: Yes. Stoke-on-Trent has had a tough time recently, but the work by Stoke-on-Trent City Council and the community testing that is going on in Stoke-on-Trent is very impressive. All of us, as MPs, can lean into that and help to support the councils, the military and others in delivering testing in our communities. We have set out details of how we can all do that today so that every single one of us can play our part.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Can I return to the vaccination of those with terminal illnesses? The wife of one of my constituents, aged 70, who has stage 4 bowel cancer and is receiving palliative care, contacted me at the weekend. If his only priority is being 70 and extremely vulnerable, he is in the fourth cohort for vaccination. The terminally ill should be in the first group. Will the Secretary of State make that change, and will he give a timescale for each of the nine priority groups for receiving the vaccine?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Member asks a very sensitive and reasonable question. Of course it is right that we should follow the clinical guidance in terms of the order of priority, and that does include those who are clinically extremely vulnerable to this disease. On the timescales, I am afraid that the answer is the same to him as to my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), which is that we do not know because it depends on the speed at which the manufacturers can produce the vaccine.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Last week I was absolutely delighted to see the vaccine rolling out across Brecon and Radnorshire. I am hugely grateful to the Vaccine Taskforce and the thousands of volunteers who have bravely stepped forward to take part in the trials, including—I must declare an interest—my dad. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the vaccine has undergone months of rigorous trials, and that work continues to ensure that other vaccines can be rolled out as quickly, but most importantly as safely, as possible?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. My hon. Friend puts it exactly right. We are working very closely with the Welsh NHS to deliver the vaccine right across Wales. I pay tribute to her father, who continues to play a leadership role in his community by stepping forward for one of the trials.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Mass testing in schools is something we have repeatedly called for in order to make sure that they can open safely. I welcome the fact that the Government are rolling out mass testing, but can they go further to ensure that schools can reopen in January, and stay open? On the vaccine, will he do everything he can, recognising that these decisions are clinically led, to make sure that school staff get access to vaccines as a priority?

Matt Hancock: I understand the yearning for a vaccine among school staff, and of course it has to be clinically led. The goal is to reduce hospitalisations and fatalities from this disease as quickly as possible. I am absolutely delighted by the community testing roll-out and the roll-out of testing to schools in the hon. Gentleman's patch. I thank him for the leadership he has shown locally, and I encourage that.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): Lancashire's community testing is really starting to ramp up and rapidly increase, and I thank the Secretary of State for that. Prioritising tier 3 areas, such as parts of Lancashire that have been in restrictions since July, is really important. Does he agree that community engagement and getting a test with the increasingly available community testing is the thing that gets us all out of tier 3 in South Ribble, Chorley and West Lancs?

Matt Hancock: I totally agree: do your bit and get a test.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: The Secretary of State is keen to remind us that we all have an individual responsibility to look after not only our own health but that of one another. Every single unnecessary journey into and out of London and the south-east increases the risk of the virus being transmitted from one part of the United Kingdom to another. The House of Commons Commission set an example today by asking all House of Commons staff not to attend Parliament unless they absolutely have to. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with his colleague the Leader of the House with a view to ensuring that all Members of Parliament can take part in all proceedings by video call, so that none of us has to make unnecessary journeys into London, with the attendant increased risk of either catching the virus or spreading it among other people?

Matt Hancock: I am afraid the answer to that question is a matter for the House rather than me as Health Secretary.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): May I take this opportunity to wish my right hon. Friend and the entire ministerial team at the Department of Health and Social Care a very happy Christmas? I hope that they are able to have some respite over the festive period. They deserve it more than anyone in this place.

Obviously, it is brilliant to see the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine being rolled out, but people are waiting to see the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, not least because it is cheaper, quicker and easier to distribute. Does the Secretary of State have any indication of when it might get approval and come on stream?

Matt Hancock: I am tempted to try to give an answer to that question, but it is very much a matter for the MHRA. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for the good wishes that he sends. In the Department these days, we no longer say at the end of a week, “I hope you have a good weekend.” We say, “I hope you have a weekend.” Likewise, I share his hope that we have a happy Christmas, but frankly I hope I get a Christmas.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Pubs in tier 2 areas are very heavily regulated environments, and in tier 3 they are completely closed. Nothing like the same restrictions are in place on public transport, in retail shops, in care homes and in other areas where we have seen much more of a spread than in pubs. Will the Health Secretary consider not just shifting areas from tier 2 to 3 when tier 2 clearly is not working, but rethinking his whole approach so that the pub sector is given the support it needs? It is actually a much more regulated, much safer environment than many of the areas that the Government have not regulated.

Matt Hancock: Many of the facilities that the hon. Gentleman talks about, such as care homes, are doing unbelievable work to remain covid secure. I understand the impact on hospitality. I love the hospitality businesses of our country—I love going to pubs—but unfortunately we need to tackle this virus, which means that some very difficult decisions are necessary.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con) [V]: I am sure my right hon. Friend will appreciate that this news will be a bitter blow to people across Basildon and Thurrock, but I accept that case numbers are sadly rising rapidly, despite the recent lockdown. Therefore, can he assure me that, as we start mass asymptomatic testing in both schools and the community to identify those who are unwittingly carrying the virus, there will be enough rapid tests available for all those who need and want one?

Matt Hancock: Yes, and I strongly commend my hon. Friend’s leadership locally. These are tough decisions, but let us get this testing going, get everybody coming forward to get a test if they can, to find those cases and ask and require people to isolate to break the chains of transmission and get Essex and Thurrock back out of tier 3 as soon as we possibly can.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): One of my closest friends, Dan Lass, who I had known for more than 30 years, died of leukaemia last Thursday morning. He was in the United States of America, but I want to ask the Secretary of State about the cancer recovery plan in this country because cancer carries on killing people and many people have ended up not presenting this year. I know we have got things going again—even during the second wave—which is an amazing job by all the oncologists and doctors, but we must ensure we get clinical trials up and running again. We must be able to save lives and we

must ensure that people go into hospitals to get the treatment they need. Otherwise, there will be more people who have lost someone like Dan.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise this issue. My condolences to him and to all the family and friends of his friend, who is sadly no longer with us. I pay tribute to the way in which the NHS has kept cancer services going during the second peak. It has not been easy, but it has saved lives. The NHS has worked hard at it, and we must keep that going for the remainder of this time until we can get through and beyond.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and the tough decisions he is having to make at the moment. Tier 3 restrictions will be tough on London, but we should not lose sight of the fact that most of the north of England, including my constituency of Keighley and Ilkley, has been under these extra restrictions for an enhanced period of time, and that has had a detrimental impact on the hospitality sector. Will he therefore consider a test and dine scheme so that we can try to get our pubs and restaurants back open as soon as possible?

Matt Hancock: A test and dine scheme is being piloted. It is something we are looking at to try to support the hospitality industry while keeping the virus under control. I will report back to my hon. Friend with the results of that pilot and see if we can get it going in Keighley.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: The roll-out of the vaccine is welcome news, but there is still a long way to go. Public messaging has been poor throughout the crisis, and that is particularly true for disabled and clinically extremely vulnerable people, who have frequently received guidance after new restrictions have started. We have all seen the vaccine prioritisation list, and the Health Secretary has been asked this several times, but, honestly, if he agreed to publish an estimated timetable for the roll-out, that would be extremely welcome and allow people to have some faith in the future and be able to plan accordingly.

Matt Hancock: I wish I could do that, but I cannot do so faithfully. What I can do is say that the majority of people will be vaccinated in the new year and we are working to ensure that the roll-out happens as swiftly as is safely possible. I understand the yearning, but I cannot put a date on it.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know how hard the people of Leeds have worked. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) made those comments and, indeed, the Treasurer of Her Majesty’s Household, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), who is in his place, and I would like to put on record our thanks to the people of Leeds for what they have done. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has hinted about what may or may not happen, and I would not want to push him on that, but one thing I have concern about—this comes from the hospitality sector—is that, if an announcement was made about coming from tier 3 to tier 2, how quickly would that be enacted? If we do come down to tier 2, the hospitality industry needs time to get moving as quickly as possible for the Christmas business season.

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend makes the case strongly not only for him but for the Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), who as a Whip cannot speak. However, believe me, behind the scenes he makes the case for Pudsey more strongly than anyone in this House makes the case for anywhere—almost. *[Laughter.]* It is a team effort. The specific answer to his question is that the decision made on Wednesday will be published on Thursday and come into effect in the early hours of Saturday morning.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The announcement of the vaccine was very welcome, but like a lot of things with the Government, there is a big difference between what has been promised and spun and what is actually happening on the ground. I was contacted this morning by Mrs Lesley Rhodes from Chester-le-Street in my constituency concerning her mother, Mrs Gowland, who is a resident of the Picktree care home in Chester-le-Street. She has been told that the vaccine will not be available to them and other care homes in County Durham until into the new year. Can the Secretary of State tell her and other residents of care homes in County Durham when they will start receiving the vaccine?

Matt Hancock: The right hon. Gentleman is quite wrong. We have been very clear with the roll-out of the vaccine on the pace at which we can start it—in fact, we started it ahead of when we committed to—and the uncertainties over the timing of the roll-out, as he will have seen from my answer to the previous but one question. When it comes to the care home roll-out, I have been absolutely clear that we aim to have it started in England before Christmas, and I am delighted it has been able to be started in Scotland today.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Evidence seems to suggest that when it comes to face coverings on public transport, if everyone wears them, it reduces the spread, but if some people do not, it can increase the spread, as people fiddle around with their face masks and others are spraying out. I do not know whether the Secretary of State agrees, but it has been very worrying travelling on trains, seeing what appears to be a marked deterioration in the number of people wearing face masks. Will he send the message out that people really must do better? I know that masks can slip for everyone, but by and large, people really must follow the rules and ensure that they are not just protecting themselves, but everybody and essential public workers on our public transport system.

Matt Hancock: What my hon. Friend says is exactly right.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: The Secretary of State heard earlier about my constituent Fred Banning, a 38-year-old father of two who has terminal cancer. For Fred and others in his situation, the vaccine is all about making the best of the time remaining. I have written to the chair of the JCVI, the Minister for covid vaccine deployment, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) and the devolved Administrations seeking a review of the priority given to those living with terminal illness. Will the Secretary of State work with them to deliver a speedy response for Mr Banning and others in his tragic circumstances?

Matt Hancock: I appreciate the sensitivity with which the hon. Lady raises this case. Of course I would be very happy to ensure that it is looked at properly by the JCVI, but the decision, as I am sure she will understand, is rightly for the JCVI.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: The Secretary of State has to recognise that the decision in relation to London will have a crippling effect upon the hospitality industry in the capital, not least because this is the time of year when they might most hope to make good the losses that they have already suffered—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We have lost Sir Robert for the time being, but would the Secretary of State like to answer half the question?

Matt Hancock: I got the gist of it, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend is right to express the concerns about the hospitality industry. This will be a significant blow to the hospitality industry, and we only take this action because it is absolutely necessary, because of the rates of increase of this virus right across London, and especially in Kent. Therefore it is necessary, and the best thing we can do is all work together to try to get London out of tier 3.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I do beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon and apologise for confusing the Secretary of State. We are actually going to Calder Valley and Craig Whittaker.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking all those local authorities, such as Calderdale, that have already come forward to put in place community testing? Can he assure me that central Government will stand squarely behind local areas, which are doing everything they can do to move to lower restrictions, as we hope Calderdale will later on in the week?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes his case, as other West Yorkshire colleagues have today. The roll-out of mass community testing in Calderdale has been impressive. There is lots more work to do, and my message, as I am sure he would reiterate, is let's get tested and let's get this virus under control in West Yorkshire.

Madam Deputy Speaker: And now I call William Wragg.

Mr Wragg: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for that warm welcome.

Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), the approach of Essex and Hertfordshire shows that district authorities can be dealt with separately between tiers. With that tantalising prospect, will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State commit to looking closely at the very encouraging data from Stockport, and indeed other boroughs of Greater Manchester, in reviewing those tiers this Thursday?

Matt Hancock: I can absolutely give that commitment and say to the people of Stockport that they have been in restrictions for a long time and have done a great thing in bringing the case rate right down. Of course we have to remain vigilant, and today's news only further amplifies that fact, but by doing the right thing, they have helped to protect life, and I will look very closely at their case on Wednesday.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): People want to spend the Christmas holiday with their loved ones—of course they do—and the message of doing so with care is one that we all must stress, but given the very worrying statistics we have heard today, can the Secretary of State tell us if he has asked for or received any modelling on the likely impact of the suspension of restrictions over the Christmas holiday and the movement of people all around the country on the spread of infections and the hospitalisation rates in the middle of January?

Matt Hancock: The truth is that it all depends on how people behave, and it is very important that we all urge people to behave with great care and responsibility over the Christmas period.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the fantastic work he has done on the vaccine, but may I make a plea to him on behalf of my constituents in Wealden whom I spoke to this weekend? They will struggle to get to some of the hospitals which are over an hour away, so will he do all he can to ensure the vaccine comes into my rural constituency?

The other bit of good news is my right hon. Friend saying from the Dispatch Box that the tiers will no longer be at county level. My Wealden residents have gone above and beyond to keep infection rates down; they must not pay the price for what is happening outside of Wealden so can we ensure that their tier remains the same or is reduced?

Matt Hancock: I will take a look at the numbers in Wealden in particular. I am concerned about the rate of increase in other parts of the south-east and will have to look very carefully at that case.

On the vaccine roll-out, of course we want the vaccine in all communities across the country. I am delighted that today we managed to start the GP roll-out, which means that we have been able to get vaccine out of the major centres and major hospitals and into over 100 different local communities, and I will check whether Wealden is on the list to make sure everybody in Wealden can get their vaccine at the appropriate time.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: I hope the Secretary of State recognises the sacrifices Geordies have made to successfully reduce transmission rates here, but I want to ask about vaccine prioritisation. Public Health England has reported that those with learning disabilities have covid-19 deaths up to six times higher than those of the general population, and it is obviously extremely difficult to maintain covid-security in care homes whose residents cannot understand social distancing, yet I am told that they are being deprioritised for the vaccine because Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation guidelines prioritise care homes for

the elderly only, and that is interpreted as being those over 80. Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm whether that is the case, and will he give greater flexibility to local public health authorities to reflect risk?

Matt Hancock: Nobody has been deprioritised: the nation has been prioritised according to clinical need, and that is rightly a judgment for the JCVI. It has of course looked into the research and data the hon. Lady rightly raises and has come to the view that the level of risk for those who are clinically extremely vulnerable is akin to the level of risk for those who are 70 to 75 years of age, and that is the reason for the prioritisation decision it has taken.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Despite all the sacrifices we have made in South Shields, we are one of the top 50 coronavirus hotspots. That is not surprising since centralised contact tracing is failing us. Just today, it has been revealed that contact tracing companies subcontracted by Serco are using inexperienced and unqualified people to gather vital clinical information. Will the Secretary of State publish a list of those companies and allow my local public health experts to take control of the situation?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady's local public health experts are already working with the national system. I gently say that instead of trying to divide people with this public-private split, as the Opposition seem desperate to do, the best way to get the case rate down in South Shields is for us all to get on the same page with public health messaging. If for every time she asked me a question about Serco, she asked me a question about how we could work together to keep people alive and safe in South Tyneside, South Shields would be in a better place.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that London is going into tier 3 because it is failing on the five tests that have been set out on tiering, and will he also confirm that Redcar and Cleveland have considerably improved across all five tests since the tier 3 decision was taken? The Secretary of State can make my wish come true, because all I want for Christmas is tier 2.

Matt Hancock: How can I reject an entreaty like that? My hon. Friend makes a very seasonal request. We will be looking at the situation very closely come Wednesday, and we will see what is in Santa's bag.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): I was really proud to see that Coventry's NHS staff administered the first coronavirus vaccinations in the country, but those staff have been let down by the Government. They were promised free parking throughout the pandemic, only for charges to be reintroduced in June, as they were at many other hospitals across the country. Only after I handed in a petition, wrote to the Prime Minister and secured a Westminster Hall debate was free parking reinstated for permit holders at Coventry's hospital, but it is still denied to staff who do not have permits. Will the Government live up to their promise and provide NHS trusts with the funding for free parking for all their staff?

Matt Hancock: I will just answer the first bit. I was absolutely thrilled to see Coventry delivering the first vaccination with the clinically approved vaccine in the world. It made my heart sing, and I am so glad that we managed to do that. With the help of the international scientists, the NHS and the regulator, we have made such progress. That really put Coventry on the map, and I hope that the hon. Lady is proud.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Will the Secretary of State thank Stroud and Gloucestershire health and care teams, who are working to the point of exhaustion? This second wave is proving to be quite difficult in a number of ways. Separately, I welcome the developments in testing and vaccines. Would the Secretary of State be willing to get PHE to develop more pilots and work on roadmaps for the wedding industry and other struggling sectors, so that we can benefit from that as quickly as possible in the new year?

Matt Hancock: The best thing we can do for the wedding industry is to try to get the vaccine rolled out as fast as possible to protect people, so that this virus no longer kills as many as it sadly does today. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to all those in Gloucestershire, including in south Gloucestershire, who are working so hard. There has been a very difficult spike in the virus. Thankfully, it is coming down now, and I hope to see the number of hospitalisations in her area reducing. While that is happening, we have to get on with the roll-out of the vaccine, which is a 24/7 job. I pay tribute to and thank all the NHS staff who are working so hard to make that happen.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I will suspend the House for three minutes in order to allow colleagues to leave safely, and to allow those who are coming in for the next fixture to attend safely.

5.4 pm

Sitting suspended.

Energy White Paper

5.9 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, today we have published the energy White Paper setting out how we will power our net zero future. This document is a labour of love, and I pay particular tribute to the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth, my right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), who has done an enormous amount of work in putting it together; he has been working on it since last year. I also thank previous Ministers who have worked on this; of course, we are now delivering it.

The White Paper sets out immediate steps to achieve our climate ambitions, to deliver on the Prime Minister's 10-point plan, to create jobs and, of course, to protect the most vulnerable in society by keeping bills affordable as we transition to net zero. It also allows us not only to build back better from covid-19 but to build back greener.

We make this transition with consumers at the heart of it, because I understand, as I think we all do in this House, how difficult things are as we recover from covid; for many people, every penny does indeed count. That is why the White Paper sets out at least £6.7 billion of support over the next six years for vulnerable and fuel-poor households. That includes the green homes grant, which could see lower-income households save up to £600 a year on their energy bills, and it includes extending the warm home discount scheme to 2026 to cover 750,000 extra households, giving those eligible at least £140 off their electricity bills each winter.

We will also tackle "loyalty penalties" once and for all by offering simpler methods of switching, including automatic switching. We will consult on rolling out opt-in switching, where consumers are offered cheaper tariffs and invited to take them up. That follows successful Ofgem trials. We will also consult on opt-out switching, which would automatically move consumers to cheaper tariffs unless they told us they did not want that to happen.

We have set out a vision of the future for us all—a future where smart appliances charge at the cheapest price, where one can sell electricity from one's car back into the grid, and where hydrogen heats homes. We will go further, to ensure that the energy system works for consumers. We will introduce competition in the building and operation of onshore networks to drive down costs and increase investment and innovation, all ultimately benefiting consumers.

We will also minimise the grid connections to our offshore wind farms, which I know is important for many colleagues here, including off the coast of East Anglia, to protect our beautiful coastal landscapes and save consumers up to £6 billion by 2050. We will use data to search for cheaper and more innovative ways to power our homes, transport and businesses by publishing the UK's first energy data strategy in the spring. This will all help to create a fair deal for consumers and protect the fuel poor, and it will give us warmer, more comfortable homes as we transition to net zero.

This White Paper comes at a vital time for rebuilding our businesses. It reinforces commitments made in the 10-point plan to deliver a green recovery. Our plans in the White Paper could support up to 220,000 jobs by

2030 in clean industries such as carbon capture, usage and storage, offshore wind, and electric vehicles. Indeed, many of the jobs created will be in our industrial heartlands, supporting our promise to level up the whole country and leave no one behind. Now is the time to seize these opportunities.

Clean energy is at the heart of our transformation from a fossil fuel-based energy system to one that will deliver net zero. Low-carbon electricity will be a key enabler for net zero as we change the way we travel and heat our homes. That is why we have reaffirmed our manifesto commitment to 40 GW of offshore wind, including 1 GW of floating wind, by 2030, which will support up to 60,000 jobs by 2030; it is why we have committed to work with industry in aiming for 5 GW of hydrogen by 2030, which will unlock £4 billion in investment and support up to 8,000 jobs; and it is why we are supporting the deployment of power with CCUS by 2030, putting in place the framework required to mobilise investment.

Of course, nuclear power continues to be an important source of clean, reliable and safe energy that, as part of our net zero mix, will help to result in lower costs to consumers. But with the existing nuclear fleet largely retiring over the next decade, we need further new capacity, so I have confirmed today that we aim to bring at least one large-scale nuclear project to the point of final investment decision by the end of this Parliament, and the Government will enter negotiations with EDF in relation to the Sizewell C project in Suffolk. These commitments will be subject to full Government, regulatory and other approvals, including of course, very importantly, value for money. The Government will negotiate this in the best interests of the British people, ensuring low-cost, secure and clean energy over the lifetime of the project.

Today, we are also publishing responses to the consultation on the regulated asset base funding model used in many significant infrastructure projects. Such a model could help to secure private investment and drive down costs for consumers in the long run. We will continue to explore a range of options, including the potential role of Government finance during construction, provided that there is clear value for money for consumers and taxpayers.

I have also been impressed by the response of businesses to our calls to decarbonise. To support them in this endeavour, I am today confirming a new and ambitious UK emissions trading scheme, which will be in place from 1 January 2021. This new UK carbon market will be the foundation on which UK businesses achieve net zero emissions. It is also more ambitious than the EU system it replaces. From day one, the cap on emissions allowed will be reduced by 5%, and we will consult in due course on how to align it with net zero. We have also committed to explore expanding the scheme to further sectors, and will continue to progress our aspirations to lead the world on carbon pricing in the run-up to COP26 next year.

In conclusion, this White Paper sets out a historic suite of measures to deliver our net zero ambitions. Fuelling the drive to 2050, as we move out of the shadow of coronavirus, these measures open the door to exciting new opportunities for our country. Taking action now ensures the UK is set on the path to ending its contribution to climate change, while giving UK industry new opportunities and creating jobs as we build the economy of tomorrow. I commend this statement to the House.

5.16 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): Can I thank the Secretary of State for his statement? This White Paper has been promised year after year, so there have been high expectations for it, and I know I should say that the Secretary of State and his Minister are deeply committed to the fight against the climate crisis, but the test of this White Paper is not just good intentions, but whether it is a plan at the scale of ambition we need to create the jobs we need and deliver the fairness we need. While there are certainly elements in the White Paper we welcome, I fear that too often the sound we hear when we read its pages is of the can being kicked down the road.

First, on ambition, we would like to go further and faster than Government targets, but the very least they must be doing is meeting, with policies, the target for 2030 they have set and the recent proposal by the Committee on Climate Change for a 78% reduction in emissions by 2035. The CCC is clear that, as part of its plan, we need to deliver zero-carbon electricity by that date—2035—but my understanding from the White Paper is that it appears simply to have an ambition of 2050 for zero-emissions electricity. Can the Secretary of State explain what appears to be lesser ambition?

On onshore wind, tidal and solar, it is concerning that the White Paper has little to say. There is only one mention, for example, of tidal in the whole document. Can the Secretary of State explain why and what he is going to do to remove the remaining barriers there are to onshore wind?

On new nuclear, we too believe that it can play a part in the energy mix, but the Government appear not to have come to a view after years of consultation, frankly, about how to pay for it, so can the Secretary of State expand on what is his preferred method of financing? Beyond nuclear, there appears to be more, I am afraid, kicking into touch. On hydrogen, France has committed £8 billion, Germany £6 billion and the UK £240 million, and all we are promised is a strategy next year. Is the Secretary of State not worried that we are going to be left behind?

Secondly, let me turn to the theme of job creation. We would like further ambition from the Government on a green recovery. While other countries are investing tens of billions in a green stimulus to create jobs now, we are investing a fraction of this amount. The Secretary of State must recognise that he is way off his 60% target of domestic manufacture of offshore wind turbines. There is a widespread view that the £160 million investment in ports, while welcome, is a drop in the ocean compared with the scale of need if we are to meet his target. Can he tell us what assessment he has made on this issue?

Crucial to jobs is also a just transition for any workers in industries that will lose out. Does the Secretary of State recognise that there needs to be a proper plan for those in fossil fuel industries, including through using their skills in renewable sectors? Can he explain why there is not such a plan already, and will he work with trade unions and others to develop such a vital plan with urgency?

Thirdly, let me turn to the issue of fairness for consumers. I am glad to see the Government trying to build on the energy price cap—once said to be part of a Marxist universe, now part of the mainstream policy of a Conservative Government. But the biggest issue here, as the Secretary

[Edward Miliband]

of State knows, is the massive job that we have to do in changing the way in which we heat our homes. I fear that the White Paper falls very short on fairness and delivery. Years ago, the Government abolished the zero-carbon homes standard due to come in in 2016, and we still have no date or plan for new homes to be built to zero-carbon. Why not? This is a false economy.

For existing homes, the Government have known for years about the challenge of insulation and conversion of the way they are heated, but, frankly, we still have one-off announcements of resources with no proper plan. They are actually cutting the green homes grant from this year to next. For homes owned by private landlords, the targets are still too weak and too far off; and they hardly scratch the surface when it comes to social housing. All this is on top of the fact that it is still being paid for through bills. These are very difficult issues, but does the Secretary of State recognise that the only answer to meet the transition and fairness is a proper long-term, street-by-street, house-by-house plan? When will that be published?

That brings me to my final point: markets have a role in this transition, but the Government must have a guiding hand. Whether it is a plan to decarbonise our homes, the future of the network infrastructure or the planned energy mix, the Government must match their intentions by playing their proper role to deliver in a way that is fair, creates jobs and shows the requisite ambition. If the Government do that, we will support them; but, on the basis of today's effort, they still have a long way to go.

Alok Sharma: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. Let me just say to him: we are all revolutionaries now. We believe in the green industrial revolution, as he does himself. I note the points that he has made, but I will tell him what some in the energy sector have been saying about the White Paper. The chief executive of Energy UK has said:

"Today's White Paper reveals the scale and opportunity of the energy transition".

The chief economist of the CBI has said:

"The Energy White Paper is an important next step in our plans to reach our net-zero emissions target...Business stands ready to deliver the investment and innovation needed to turn ambition into reality".

The chief executive of RenewableUK said:

"Today's white paper provides greater clarity to the companies investing across the UK to deliver our net zero emissions target."

The acting chief executive of Citizens' Advice said:

"There's a lot to welcome in today's announcement."

I could go on. [HON. MEMBERS: "Go on!"] No; I know that other colleagues want to ask questions.

This Government have shown a great deal of ambition when it comes to the green industrial revolution. The right hon. Gentleman has seen the road map that is being laid out. We have, of course, had the Prime Minister's 10-point plan with the £12 billion investment, leveraging in three times as much from the private sector, creating and supporting 250,000 jobs by 2030; he has seen the nationally determined contribution that was published, which was universally welcomed; and he will now have seen that the energy White Paper has been published, building on

the 10-point plan. He talked about the fact that this White Paper has now appeared. When I spoke about this last week with the Chair of the Select Committee and said that I would get it out by Christmas, he asked me, "Which Christmas?". I was keen to point out that it was Christmas this year.

Let me address some of the points that the right hon. Gentleman has raised. First, he talked about the CCC, which has made a recommendation regarding the NDC of a reduction of at least 68%. We have adopted that recommendation, and that puts us on the pathway to net zero by 2050. The right hon. Gentleman also talked about tidal. He will know that we have had a call for evidence on that subject. There will be an opportunity through the contracts for difference auction process next year to bring forward projects in that area. On offshore wind, let me be clear that we are talking about the 60% UK supply chain. He will know that in the last few days we have launched the ports infrastructure competition, which will be an opportunity for ports to bid for Government funding. This will ultimately allow us to build products relating to offshore wind in the UK and to create jobs in our country.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about financing for nuclear. As I said, we are at the start of that process of discussions with EDF, the developer at Sizewell C. There is a whole range of financing models that we need to work our way through. On hydrogen, he will know that the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth, my right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), has been doing a brilliant job, working with the sector and academics. He leads the Hydrogen Council. I will be setting out our strategy at the start of next year and, of course, it is also about unlocking private sector investment.

The shadow Secretary of State talks about fairness for consumers. I am pleased that he welcomes that, and, as he will have seen, the acting chief executive of Citizens Advice has also welcomed the White Paper. In conclusion, of course we need to go further, but the Government are putting their best foot forward in delivering on a green industrial revolution.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): Without wishing to disinter policies buried under the "Ed Stone", the policy of the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) was a price freeze rather than a price cap, which would have led to higher bills for consumers as prices fell.

I welcome the White Paper that the Secretary of State has published today. Does he agree that we are on the verge of a real transformation in technology, in which energy can go from something that was expensive, dirty and needed to be suppressed and eked out to something that can be clean, cheap and abundant? To drive that revolution forward, will he make sure that he invests in energy research and technology and that he changes regulation, so that the incumbents cannot frustrate the roll-out of those technologies nor deny to consumers the benefits that they bring about?

Alok Sharma: Of course, my right hon. Friend led on all this work when he was Secretary of State in the Department and I thank him for that. The White Paper is a product of some of the excellent reforms that he undertook in Government, including the energy price cap.

I agree with him: of course we want to invest in energy research. He will have seen the settlement that we got at the spending review. We will power ahead in research and development and be a leading country when it comes to R&D.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Clearly, we welcome any sensible proposals for the transition to net zero and value for consumers, and we will support policies accordingly. The White Paper is a year and a half late. Much of it is wishlists and it still has the same outdated nuclear obsession. For existing nuclear waste, there is a £132 billion bill. For Hinkley Point, it is £20 billion. To add to that £150 billion, we have Sizewell C, which is £20 billion, and Bradwell to follow, which is £20 billion. Despite market failure, the Government have not given up on Wylfa, Oldbury and Moorside, so that is potentially another £50 billion. Small modular reactors, advanced reactors and nuclear fission mean further blank cheques. We cannot be serious about energy bills and value for money when it all comes to 35-year nuclear contracts. Compare that with the commitment in the White Paper of just £50 million to upgrade properties to EPC band C.

What cost-benefit analysis has been done on the cost of nuclear jobs versus renewables? What is the Secretary of State doing about a route to market for pumped hydro? In Scotland, the Cruachan extension and the proposed Coire Glas scheme could be undertaken if the Government showed the same commitment to pumped hydro as they have nuclear. Can he confirm the route to market for tidal and wave energies, which he touched on earlier, and a contract for difference for hydrogen production? These processes, along with carbon capture and storage, are the chance to be world-leading and create green jobs, if they get a move on.

How will the Secretary of State ensure transparency for CCS site selections? Surely Peterhead, with its hydrogen proposals and existing carbon dioxide storage licence, has to be first in the batch. Can he confirm that it is under consideration, because it is not showing in the map in the White Paper? Sadly today, BiFab went into administration, with its yard in Tayside closing, which is proof of the failure to date of the CfD procurement process. Will the Secretary of State apologise for that and make sure that, following the consultation on procurement, this is remedied for the next auction process and that we get these jobs delivered in the UK?

There is so much in the White Paper—the future homes standard, the hydrogen strategy, heating buildings, decarbonisation, heat pump delivery—that is going to be consulted on from next year onwards. How can the Secretary of State make sure that these all come together and are delivered in time for the interim target of 2030? Finally, I welcome confirmation of the emissions trading system agreed with the devolved nations, and will he confirm that the carbon emissions tax alternative is now dead in the water?

Alok Sharma: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the UK ETS scheme that is being launched, but I will take it from his comments that he is not a fan of nuclear power. Perhaps I could explain to him that, of course, renewables are playing an increasingly large part in our energy mix, but the wind does not always

blow as hard as we would like and the sun does not always shine. We know that nuclear power is reliable, safe and not intermittent; that is why it needs to be a part of the energy mix. He will know that a significant number of power plants will be coming offline and that is why we are proceeding with our discussions on Sizewell C.

The hon. Gentleman talked about tidal wave and tidal power. As I said in my response to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), there will be an opportunity, through the CFD 4 process, to come forward with projects on that.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman talked about CCUS. What I can tell him is that at this point we have not made any decisions about the sites of CCUS plants, but we will provide much more detail on this in early 2021. Those who are interested, including folks from his constituency, will then be able to take a look at what we set out.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, the EU negotiations on state aid go far beyond the question of mere subsidies and include tax incentives and the like. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that nothing in any treaty text or any subsequent Act of Parliament will prevent the United Kingdom from having its own sovereign state aid rules, including those on energy, so that we are not subjugated to EU state aid rules or to the European Court of Justice, given that the EU intends to impose and enforce its rules against us, which would be by a majority vote in the Council of Ministers behind closed doors without us at the table after 31 December?

Alok Sharma: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. If I may, I refer him to the written ministerial statement I laid in the House some weeks ago, in which I said that from 1 January 2021 the Government will follow the World Trade Organisation rules for subsidy control and any related commitments the Government have agreed in free trade agreements. We also intend to publish a consultation in the coming months on whether we should go further than our WTO and international commitments. That will include consulting on whether any further legislation should be put in place.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement, and congratulate him and his team on the publication of this long-awaited but comprehensive White Paper. He will know that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee will be looking at it in the round in the new year, including in our inquiry on decarbonising heat, but may I ask him one question today about gaps between the sixth carbon budget and the energy White Paper? To give one example, the sixth carbon budget from the Committee on Climate Change requested that all new boilers should be hydrogen-ready by 2025 at the latest, and that to meet all our hydrogen requirements we would need to generate 90 TWh by 2035. In the energy White Paper, however, the commitment to boilers is for the mid-2030s and only 42 TWh of power from hydrogen by 2030, a gap of some 48 TWh. Will he acknowledge that gap between the energy White Paper and the sixth carbon budget, and perhaps tell the House whether there will be further announcements in the new year to bridge that gap?

Alok Sharma: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. Seeing what the CCC has said, we will of course be responding on CB6 next year. That and the 10-point plan take us forward towards fulfilling CB4 and CB5, but we will set out more details in due course on how we get to those budgets. We will also be setting out, between now and COP26, a net-zero strategy for the country.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's support for nuclear and the discussions on Sizewell C. Is the eventual financing model entirely contingent upon the 30% reduction in the build cost for nuclear that is set out in the White Paper? To what extent does he see Government investing in nuclear over the medium to long term as a first resort, or should the first resort be investment from the private sector, with Government investment a last resort?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend makes an important point about funding models. Of course, Sizewell C will be second of a kind in terms of projects. I think there is likely to be an appetite from the private sector to invest in that, but we are at the start of the discussion with EDF to explore financing options. It could involve the regulated asset base model. As I said in my statement, we will look at the part that the Government or consumers could play in the financing, but at the heart of any decision will be ensuring that we are delivering value for money for British taxpayers and British consumers.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The section of the White Paper that I shall be reading is the one on hydrogen. The Secretary of State and the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth will know that in my area—the Mersey and Dee area—there is a strong proposition on hydrogen via HyNet. May I urge the Secretary of State to resist the temptation to put all his eggs in one basket? If we are to move forward as a nation, we need to spread around the expertise and not play one region off against another when considering the destination of the investment in hydrogen.

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. As part of the 10-point plan and the White Paper, we have talked about how we can level up across the country. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth will be happy to have further discussions with him. As I said, he has been working incredibly hard on the hydrogen strategy, and we are happy to hear from all colleagues.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) [V]: The European Commission is mobilising €1 trillion, and President-elect Biden will mobilise \$2 trillion, but the UK saw only £12 billion for its green industrial revolution. Issuing yet more consultations, scant detail, repackaged announcements and bluster today about unleashing competition is simply not enough to tackle the climate emergency and fuel poverty. With the energy White Paper still leaving a huge gap of 101 million tonnes between meeting our 2032 carbon target, what is the Secretary of State going to do to close that gap?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Lady talks about what is happening in the US, I should point her to the very supportive comments that former Vice-President Al Gore

made over the weekend about the work that the UK is doing. It is not just about public money. She is fixated with the idea that it is just taxpayers who fund this stuff. The whole point is to ensure that we have revenue models and mechanisms whereby the private sector can invest. If she wants to see how this is done, she should look at the offshore wind sector, which was nascent a few years ago. We have introduced the contracts for difference process. We now have the biggest offshore wind sector in the world. That is how to do it: public and private sector working together.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend spare a thought for rural Britain? Policies that may work for, say, London, which is 600 square miles and has 73 MPs, are a lot more difficult to implement in Gainsborough, which is nearly 500 square miles and has only one MP—albeit a very good one, I have to say. Our rural lines were stripped away by Dr Beeching. If I want to take a bus to the nearest town, it takes an hour, going around about 10 villages, and if I want to walk, it is a four-hour round trip, so we rely on the internal combustion engine. Frankly, an electric charging point in West Lindsey is about as rare as an oasis in a desert. Can we have some practical policies to help rural Britain?

Alok Sharma: I am sure my right hon. Friend's constituents will agree with him that he is an outstanding Member of Parliament for Gainsborough. I agree with him—we are not trying to get people to stop using cars. We are saying that we want to move to zero-emission vehicles. That is why, in the 10-point plan that was published, we have put forward many hundreds of millions of pounds to support electric vehicle manufacturing and £1.3 billion for charging points across the country. We need to continue to work to ensure that we have EV manufacturing in the UK, and of course, the costs of that will come down as we have economies of scale.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): To accompany the White Paper, the British Government have confirmed that they are willing to take a direct equity stake in the proposed £20 billion Sizewell C nuclear plant. Why is similar direct public funding not being made available to other energy technologies, such as the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, instead of the very costly contracts for difference model?

Alok Sharma: May I respectfully suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he looks at what we have actually said about nuclear? What we have said is that we are starting a discussion with the developer, EDF. We have not set out a financing model. As I have said, the point at which a decision is made on whether we move to a final investment decision in this Parliament will be on the basis that any financing model delivers value for money for the British taxpayer and, indeed, for consumers.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has made an important statement today, but he will be sensitive to the fact that there are constituencies such as mine in Pembrokeshire that have been heavily reliant on the oil and gas industries for the past 50 years and are particularly vulnerable to these big strategic changes in energy policy? Does he agree that, with the right level of Government support which

will unlock private sector investment, we can see a new generation of quality jobs and apprenticeships in offshore wind and marine renewables, such as wave and tidal? Will he pledge to ensure that the Government provide that support, so that constituencies such as mine are not left behind?

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend is, I know, a great champion for renewables, and, indeed, for his own constituency, and he will know that I very much agree with him. Marine renewables is a technology that very much excites me. He will have seen that we recently held a call for evidence on the potential of marine energy projects, and that we have also announced the ambition of 1 GW of floating wind by 2030, supported by CFDs and innovative funding. I suggest that if there are particular projects that he thinks are viable in his constituency, he should point them in the direction of the CFD auction process when it takes place next year.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): It is absolutely crucial that we achieve transition to net zero, and that that transition is just. There can be no just transition to net zero without the skills and expertise in human capital in the North sea oil and gas industry. An essential component of that will be securing a sector deal between Government and the industry. Can the Secretary of State tell us when he expects to be able to announce the successful conclusion of sector deal negotiations with the industry?

Alok Sharma: The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth and I have a regular dialogue with the sector and, of course, I am fully aware of the importance of oil and gas as an employer in Scotland and, indeed, across the whole of the UK. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that, in November, we received a formal proposal from industry for a deal, and we will now move into negotiations with the sector. On timing, we aim to complete the negotiations and publish that in Q1 next year.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his ministerial team on today's significant statement. I warmly welcome the commitment shown towards nuclear energy and the open mind that he shows towards the financing model. Does he recognise the challenges that the regulated asset base will give to assessing the risk at the early stage of a traditional build of nuclear power stations? Will he also show the same enthusiasm for small modular reactors that provide an exciting opportunity to parts of the UK that are looking for significant investment and the job-creating opportunities that small modular and advanced modular reactors can bring?

Alok Sharma: I very much support the idea that we should be advancing on SMRs and AMRs, and my right hon. Friend knows that there is a £385 million advanced nuclear fund to support the development of SMRs. He will also know that we will be supporting a consortium led by Rolls-Royce on that. He is right that that offers not only an opportunity for us to create jobs, but export opportunities for our country in the future.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Given that the typical training period to become qualified in heat pump installation is 48 months, will the Secretary of State clarify what steps are being taken to ensure that

we have enough qualified people to meet the demand for heat pumps following the extension of the green homes grant outlined in the White Paper and, in the longer term, to meet our net zero targets?

Alok Sharma: The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth leads the recently launched green jobs taskforce. As the hon. Lady will know, one can take advantage of a whole range of measures as part of the green homes grant. Of course, the Department is working very hard to ensure that the vouchers are issued and that more and more installers come on to the system.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The White Paper makes it clear that the Government will consider the role of tidal power as part of the clean energy mix. My right hon. Friend will be aware of proposals for a tidal lagoon off the north Wales coast, with a potential installed capacity of 2.5 GW. By any standard, that is a major generating station and one that could make a huge contribution to the nation's energy needs. The proposal has considerable local support, so will my right hon. Friend or his colleague the Minister of State meet me and my hon. Friends the Members for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) and for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) to consider what can be done to take it further?

Alok Sharma: Yes, of course. If there are interesting projects out there we want to know. I do not know whether this is one of the projects that came forward in the call for evidence, but of course the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth or I would be happy to meet my right hon. Friend and the business involved.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: With nuclear power both eye-wateringly expensive and painfully slow in the face of the climate emergency, it is disappointing that there is not more ambition on renewables and efficiency instead. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, far from saving consumers money, the regulated asset base funding model essentially means that consumers pay twice: first to reduce the cost of borrowing by increasing bills before the plant is operating, forcing liability for construction delays on to customers, and secondly for extremely costly power once the plant starts operating? Will he immediately publish the modelling that allows him to mysteriously claim that this will drive down costs for consumers?

Alok Sharma: First, I was on a call with the hon. Lady recently and she acknowledged—through gritted teeth, I think—that she was quite pleased with the UK's NDC commitment of at least 68%, so I thank her for that. On nuclear, of course we will look at a range of financing models. I explained earlier why nuclear is so important as part of the energy mix—it is a non-intermittent supply—but of course the whole point of the regulated asset base model is that, ultimately, it should result in cheaper prices for consumers.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Of course renewables are preferable, but as the Secretary of State has just set out, for quite some way into the future we will need non-intermittent or dialable energy sources as well. The ultimate game-changer might be battery technology, which could change that balance. Will he say a little about what the Government are doing to support research and development on batteries?

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point about batteries. We are putting investment into gigafactories and batteries for electric vehicles. Importantly, we will also be looking into energy storage technology, such as hydrogen batteries. The amount of storage we need will depend, ultimately, on the energy mix, but he raises a very important point, and of course developing battery storage will be vital.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Madam Dirprwy Lefarydd. The White Paper mentions small modular reactors. When will the Secretary of State be in a position to update the House regarding the process for locating SMRs, bearing in mind that the Welsh Government are establishing a development company, Cwmni Egin, for the former nuclear site at Trawsfynydd?

Alok Sharma: Obviously, SMRs in the UK are currently at the design phase, and the consortium led by Rolls-Royce is making progress. We think there is the potential for SMR technology to be operational by the early 2030s, so we are still some way away from that. I am sure that, over the coming period, I or the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth will be able to come to the House and give more information about that.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: Firms such as Westfield in my constituency of Dudley South stand ready to drive green growth in the transport sector, but to really unlock that they need charging points with grid-to-vehicle technologies and type approval for new clean electric passenger pods. Will my right hon. Friend work with his colleague the Transport Secretary to ensure that the infrastructure and type approvals are available so that those businesses can drive the green energy revolution?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is a champion of the green energy revolution, and he mentioned Westfield. After the publication of the 10-point plan, the Transport Secretary and I did a roundtable with auto manufacturers, which were extremely enthusiastic about the support that we are providing for electric vehicle manufacturing. I mentioned previously the £1.3 billion to support the continued roll-out of charge points at UK homes and businesses and on streets over the next few years. That will be absolutely vital in ensuring that we are delivering a change and see more zero-emission vehicles on the road.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I welcome the transition to net zero. The Secretary of State may be aware that the Zero Carbon Humber project offers a world-first opportunity to decarbonise our region, promote local industry, attract investment and create jobs. When the Secretary of State is making decisions about which projects are successful for the Department's industrial strategy challenge fund, will he take into account not just our green credentials but the impact of covid on our local economy and the need for job creation?

Alok Sharma: I commend the hon. Lady for speaking up on behalf of her constituency and for potential CCUS projects there. As I said in response to a previous question, we will provide more details on all that in early 2021, and at that point I will of course be very happy to have a further discussion.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the publication of an excellent energy White Paper, in which the word "nuclear" is mentioned about 80 times, and the stated ambition to make a financial investment decision on at least one large-scale nuclear project by the end of this Parliament. Apart from writing to Santa, what more does he suggest I do to ensure that my constituents on Ynys Môn have some good news regarding Wylfa Newydd this Christmas?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is a great champion of Ynys Môn, and I know she is doing her bit to speak up on behalf of her constituents. We will of course consider any new projects that come forward with any viable companies and investors that wish to develop sites in Wales or elsewhere. She should direct them to my Department.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be well aware that a shockingly high proportion of households are living in energy poverty across the UK. In my constituency of Warwick and Leamington, 8.9% of households are in energy poverty. I have heard about the green homes grant and how it has not really succeeded since it was introduced. What are the Secretary of State's plans to ensure that those living in social rented properties will be able to have that addressed, and that local authorities and housing associations get the funding they need to implement that?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the £3 billion funding that the Chancellor announced some months ago includes funding for social housing. We are making progress with the green homes grant. Thousands of vouchers have been issued, and the Department is doing its bit daily to ensure that we issue more vouchers to those who have applied and have more installers coming on to the system.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): The north Wales Mersey Dee region has the potential to be at the centre of a green industrial revolution, from Wylfa Newydd and offshore wind to a gigafactory, hydrogen production and carbon capture, but there is also great interest in harnessing tidal energy, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) said, so will the Secretary of State take this on board? Will he also acknowledge the coastal protection benefits that a tidal lagoon could bring?

Alok Sharma: It is clear that there is huge support on this side of the House for marine energy projects, and as I have said, we want to look at any projects that come forward that can be supported by the contracts for difference auction process during next year and by any innovation funding that is available.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Minister has described this as a labour of love, but it is more like a policy that Labour does love, with its price controls, subsidies, directing investment, telling firms what kind of cars they can produce and telling consumers what kind of cars they can buy, all at an eye-watering cost. According to his own Department, reducing CO₂ emissions by 68% will cost between £50 billion and £100 billion a year. What effect will this have on the energy prices that consumers pay, on fuel poverty and on business competitiveness? Is it not a fact that this time last year people voted blue, they are now getting green, and this policy will put them in the red?

Alok Sharma: If the right hon. Gentleman looks at our manifesto, he will understand that, yes, people voted blue but they voted blue for green policies as well, and that is what we are implementing. On the issue of cost, he will know that over the last 30 years, successive Governments have managed to grow this country's economy by 75% and cut emissions by 43% at the same time, so green growth is possible. He talks about the car sector, but I can tell him that the auto manufacturing sector was incredibly pleased with what we set out in the 10-point plan. The real issue is to ensure that we have revenue models in place so that private sector investors can come in on projects with confidence.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I welcome the energy White Paper, which charts an ambitious and, importantly, sustainable path to sustainability. I would like to raise a point about Jet Zero and the aviation sector, which is very important to my constituents. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, looking beyond the pandemic, sustainability will be a huge challenge to the aviation sector and that the world-leading work being done on Jet Zero by this Government will help to secure the future of aviation and support jobs and businesses in Runnymede and Weybridge?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is so right. We have established the Jet Zero Council, whose aim is to accelerate the development and adoption of new technologies so that we can develop our strategy to reach net zero in aviation. Ultimately, we want to ensure that we are doing our bit to ensure that we have low-carbon flight, because there is huge potential in that as well.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I welcome the statement by the Secretary of State. We need detailed plans that will show not only how we will reduce our carbon output but how we will protect the jobs and livelihoods of those who work in our oil and gas industries. Today's White Paper gives them no answers and no hope. Does he agree that his Department must bring oil and gas workers with us as the industry evolves so that we can face a brighter, greener future together?

Alok Sharma: I agree with the hon. Lady. This whole plan is about jobs, jobs, jobs. That is precisely what we are looking to establish: green jobs, high value added jobs, and jobs that are going to increase productivity across our economy. When it comes to oil and gas, I mentioned the North sea transition deal, and we will be setting out more details of that in Q1 next year.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I really welcome the Government's green agenda, but banning the sale of diesel and petrol cars from 2030 came as a complete surprise. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that this will result in increased costs for the automotive industry, for businesses and for consumers?

Alok Sharma: I note my hon. Friend's point, but of course there was a consultation on this: we have talked to the sector and, as I said, when we made the formal announcement on this the sector welcomed the changes, because connected with the announcement on the 2030 and 2035 dates was almost £3 billion-worth of support for the sector, which will allow us to ensure that we build giga-factories and support the supply chain. Ultimately, that is the direction of travel. The sector accepts it and I think consumers do, too.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I very much welcome the White Paper. My personal regret is that my own constituency cannot have a new nuclear power station because of the Scottish National party's obsessive and dogmatic opposition to nuclear, but may I press my right hon. Friend again on the issue of oil and gas, which is so important to Scotland? Some 100,000 jobs depend on the industry. I heard what he said in relation to the transition deal and its appearance in quarter 1 next year. That is very welcome, not just because it was a manifesto commitment by the Conservative party at the last general election, but because it will bring certainty to those 100,000 workers in that industry.

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend is a voice of reason. I just wish the SNP would listen to him more.

The North sea transition deal was absolutely in the manifesto, and we want to use it as a vehicle to create new jobs as well as trade and investment opportunities. The whole point is also to ensure that we retain the skills of the highly skilled individuals we have in the sector. As I have said, we will be publishing details in Q1 2021, but this has been a real collaboration between the sector and the Government.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for his commitment to the future of SMRs and his target of 2030, but that might be too late for Hartlepool power station, which is due to be decommissioned in 2025, the first of the existing fleets. We have a skilled nuclear workforce and a safe nuclear transport infrastructure, so what hope can the Secretary of State give my constituents on the future of nuclear jobs in Hartlepool?

Alok Sharma: If there are parties out there who want to come forward with proposals for the hon. Gentleman's constituency, we will of course look at them. The value of developing SMRs is that one will potentially be able to have factories in a number of places in time, and that will mean that we continue the agenda of levelling up across the country.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): These proposals are extremely welcome as they provide a route map to the zero-carbon future. They can also bring enormous economic benefits to areas such as Waveney in Suffolk by creating a very wide range of jobs, whether working on Sizewell C or in offshore wind, reusing our oil and gas infrastructure, running local community electricity schemes, or retrofitting our homes and places of work. Can the Secretary of State confirm that a radical new skills strategy will sit alongside the White Paper?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. He will know that some weeks ago I set out some initial thoughts on a refreshed industrial strategy, and of course we must ensure that skills are at the front and centre of that. We in the Government have discussions around these matters, and I hope that during the early part of next year we will be able to set out a refreshed industrial strategy

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): County Durham has a proud and long history of coalmining. Ironically, it has left the county with a new valuable resource of green energy: the thermal heat from former coalmines. Durham County Council and Newcastle

[Mr Kevan Jones]

University are working together to develop the Seaham garden village project, which will tap into this new heat source for 1,500 homes. May I ask the Secretary of State to look at that and see how similar products could be spread out across County Durham and other former coalfield areas?

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth is already looking at this issue and has shown a great deal of interest. He will be happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss issues around geothermal.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Celtic sea, I am working with colleagues to try to facilitate floating wind turbines in the Celtic sea, which will help us to move towards net zero. Those involved in their construction are facing issues with the Crown Estate, so will my right hon. Friend do what he can to support this project and the clean energy it could generate?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend will know that in August the Crown Estate awarded seabed rights for the first floating wind project in Welsh waters of the Celtic sea. She will also know that the Crown Estate has just started market engagement to seek views on how to drive forward new projects. If things are not going as well as she would like, I or my right hon. Friend the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth will be happy to meet her to have a discussion.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): There are three broad aspects to the energy market: security, to be self-reliant, the environment, and of course affordability for Mr and Mrs in Bosworth. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those three aspects are addressed in the White Paper, and will he ensure that they are not mutually exclusive?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Those issues are absolutely not mutually exclusive. As he says, they comprise a golden thread running through the White Paper. I go back to the point that some Opposition Members have raised about nuclear. As part of energy security, we need to have a diverse energy mix, and that is why nuclear is very much part of that.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The HyNet project is critical for the whole of the industrial sector in the Mersey-Dee area, particularly for Ellesmere Port, but actually this is to protect existing jobs as well as create new ones. May I join my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) in urging the Secretary of State not to place all his hydrogen eggs in one basket?

Alok Sharma: I do not know whether it is possible to place eggs in a hydrogen basket, but the hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We need to level up across the country and we will do just that.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): This energy White Paper is bristling with good things. Let me highlight two of them. The Secretary of State alluded to the negotiations with Sizewell C. May I highlight for him

the importance of this project not just to the nuclear energy sector or to that part of the country, but to my constituents in Gloucester, where the operational headquarters of EDF Energy at Barnwood are extremely important? Can he confirm that access to Government financing will be the key to reducing the risk and costs of this project? The second great bit of news is his commitment to considering the role of wave and tidal energy. As chair of the all-party marine energy group, I thoroughly support this initiative, which I hope will end with some pots for marine energy and the contract for difference in November, before COP26.

Alok Sharma: I am delighted that my hon. Friend thinks that this paper is bristling with ideas and energy. I know that for a long time my right hon. Friend the Minister has been bristling with energy getting this thing put together. On Sizewell C, we are going to look at the financing model and that will be part of the discussion, but one of the other key points is that it will be creating jobs during the construction phase and indeed beyond. A number of colleagues have asked what is the connection between this and the lives of people in our constituencies, and the answer is that it is very much about jobs.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: As tail-end Charlie, I must say that the White Paper is a really good piece of work. It has taken a very long time and, as somebody who is rather keen on nuclear, for obvious reasons, I am delighted. However, having read through it, I will say that one of the great things we have down here is the National College for Nuclear, and apprentices in this remarkable industry do need time to be trained in nuclear skills. If we are talking about 10 years for the first SMRs and for Sizewell, we will need more people and we will need them quickly. May I urge the Secretary of State to visit Hinkley—obviously—and to ensure adequate funding within the White Paper so that we can train the future of the nuclear industry?

Alok Sharma: I would never describe my hon. Friend as tail-end Charlie; I think we have left the best till last. He raises an important point about skills, which a number of colleagues have talked about. We very much recognise the need to ensure that we train people up for the sunrise industries of the future, and we will look to address some of that in the refreshed industrial strategy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) was not quite last, because we have an amendment to the call list, so finally, I call Siobhan Baillie.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last, but not least. The Government have stated they will be ambitious in developing fusion power and, as the Secretary of State knows, I am ambitious about developing opportunities for Stroud. Business West and other groups are already making the case to use the decommissioned nuclear site in Berkeley as an opportunity for fusion, and rightly so. Will the Secretary of State tell us a little more about the potential benefits of fusion power for the climate, for energy and for jobs?

Alok Sharma: Madam Deputy Speaker, I can now say that we definitely did leave the best till last—I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) is not listening. My hon. Friend raises an important point. As she knows—in fact, this is set out on page 51 of the Energy White Paper—the Government have already committed over £400 million towards new UK fusion programmes. She will also know that this month we launched the spherical tokamak for energy production—STEP—programme and published an open call for communities across the UK to apply to be the host site. I encourage her to look at that and, should her constituents or anyone in the area want to apply, they should put their details forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am going to suspend the House for three minutes so that people can leave safely and the next cohort of Members can enter safely.

6.11 pm

Sitting suspended.

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

Covid-19

6.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I beg to move,

That this House has considered covid-19.

I am pleased to say that all across the country the roll-out of the covid-19 vaccine is continuing at pace. Tens of thousands of patients, such as the very memorable Margaret Keenan and Martin Kenyon, have already received their jab, at more than 70 sites across the UK. That number will continue to increase, which is positive news, as I am sure we will all agree. This week also marks the start of the wave 1 roll-out of vaccination in GP-led sites, and I want to take this opportunity to thank general practitioners and their teams for their work in getting this programme up and running. I visited a practice this morning in Newham, where I talked to the team—to doctors, practice managers and the fantastic practice nurse, Raj, who had been busy caring for patients, delivering flu jabs and giving diabetes advice and is soon to be administering the covid vaccine. All those things, along with the promise of vaccines in care homes by Christmas, are encouraging developments, which colleagues from across the House will join me in welcoming. Right hon. and hon. Members will also be pleased with the announcement of 1,800 projects to upgrade and refurbish hospitals across 178 NHS trusts this winter; from fixing new roofs to new MRI machines, the £600 million package will make a real difference for patients and staff.

However, we all understand that this progress should be taken while bearing the current situation in mind. Coronavirus is very much with us. This past week, the average number of new cases each day was 15,960. Average daily hospital admissions currently stand at more than 1,500. As Professor Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer for England reminded us only last week, even with our mass vaccination programme we will “not have sufficient protection” for the next three months. The number of cases is flattening and even rising in some parts of the country.

So it is important to remember that this is one of the most difficult times of year normally for respiratory infections. The winter period is always the most challenging time for the NHS, let alone in these unusual covid-tinged times. Therefore, we must do everything we can collectively to avoid putting any further burden on the NHS. We should continue with our current efforts, so that we can give all health and care workers the best possible environment, despite the current circumstances of rolling out that vaccine and saving lives. I am sure I speak for everyone when I say that I would like to take this opportunity to express my continued gratitude to those frontline members of staff in our health and care service up and down the country for all they do, in hospitals and in the community.

To reiterate, this Government will continue to focus their response and build around three vital pillars: tiers, testing and vaccine. The House has just heard my right hon. Friend the Health and Social Care Secretary outline the latest changes in our system of tiering. The first formal review of tiering decisions is to take place this Wednesday, two weeks after the new rules came into force. However, when the virus is growing exponentially there is not a moment to spare, so we are acting ahead

[Jo Churchill]

of the formal review date and putting in place stronger measures in several areas. I know these restrictions can be hard, but this action is absolutely essential not just to keep people safe, but because we have seen that early action can prevent more damaging and longer-lasting problems later on. We will continue to stand with those who are impacted through our furlough scheme and support for businesses and the self-employed.

Even with the review point ahead of us, and following my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's statement earlier today, the Government have wasted no time in taking bold action where it is needed. As soon as we became aware of these worrying trends in parts of London, Kent and Essex, a plan was put in place, and from last Friday surged mobile testing units have been deployed to where they are needed most. They are now in several boroughs of London, in parts of Essex that border London and parts of Kent where statistics show a high prevalence of covid-19, particularly among secondary school pupils. That is why our community testing is targeted towards the 11 to 18-year-olds and their families and teachers.

In addition to this testing support, we will continue to work with the local authorities and schools affected. Here I want to encourage anyone who has been asked to come forward for a test to do so, even if they are not displaying symptoms, for we know that community testing works. That is why this kind of deployment is available all across the UK. We are working with devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and now over 100 local authorities across England, so that people in Kent and Medway, Derbyshire, Stoke-on-Trent and Darlington can access tests. I thank local authorities for their efforts in mobilising the power of community testing for their areas.

Community testing works because it is the best way that we can identify and then isolate people with the virus. We know that people with coronavirus will often feel unwell and may well seek medical attention or indeed, unfortunately, be hospitalised. However, one in three people have no symptoms at all, but they can still pass it on to others through asymptomatic transmission. So that we can reduce transmission and help people protect their friends and families, I would like to urge everyone to keep following the restrictions in place, taking the sensible steps that have, I hope, become part of everyone's daily routine: washing our hands, covering our face and making space, as well as opening the window to ventilate places where we can. This will help protect those around us, our families and friends.

We cannot stop all our efforts just because a vaccine is here—that would be premature and risk everything that people have worked so hard for—but we do know that, in time, the vaccine represents our surest way out of the challenges we face. Many of the population will get their jabs in the first part of next year, as more vaccines come on stream, and I am encouraged by the peer review in *The Lancet* confirming that our home-grown vaccine candidate, the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine, is clinically safe. We will be ready to roll out that vaccine along with any other vaccines in our portfolio if they are approved by the independent regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. Vaccines are safe—so I urge people please to step forward.

Into the new year, our dedication to and efforts on the roll-out will continue. We will expand vaccination centres further. We will look to larger venues such as sports stadiums and conference centres. I remind everyone that they do not need to contact their doctor or the NHS; they will contact people when it is their turn for a jab. I know that many up and down the UK are eagerly awaiting that call.

6.23 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I would like to start with a tribute to Dame Barbara Windsor. She holds a special place in the affections of the nation from her earliest days with the Joan Littlewood Theatre Workshop to being landlady of the Vic. Barbara Windsor asked us to make a stand against dementia, and we will. Our thoughts are with Dame Barbara's friends and family.

It is now nine months since the first British patient contracted covid-19—nine months that have tested our national character, our national health service and our national leaders; and nine months of terrible grief for tens of thousands of families who face a Christmas with an empty chair at the family dining table. Torn apart with anguish and united in pain, those families were robbed of their chance to say goodbye and robbed of the last hug or kiss, and they are still unable to sleep at night.

Rates of depression doubled during the first wave, but referrals to mental health services dropped. Couple that with nine months of economic turmoil exacerbated by the Brexit shambles, with millions facing the dole or losing their homes and businesses, and people need assurances that their wellbeing will be protected. There are still 3 million freelancers and small business owners excluded from Government support and facing utter ruin, which takes a terrible toll on their mental wellbeing. Some of the 3 million excluded have even, tragically, taken their own lives. It is not too late for Ministers to do the right thing and support the 3 million excluded.

What a year it has been. When the British people were called upon to stand together against a common enemy and to rise to greatness, they were not found wanting. I am thinking of the people who queued down the street to volunteer to deliver food and medicine; people who donated to food banks and looked in on neighbours; and people such as Captain Sir Thomas Moore, who raised not just money, but our spirits and our sense of ambition. I am thinking of those who spearheaded the #WhatAboutWeddings campaign, supporting people whose wedding day plans were derailed and people in the wedding industry whose businesses disappeared. I am thinking of people in the Beauty Backed campaign, supporting workers—mostly women—in the multi-million pound beauty sector whose salons were closed and who could not work to feed their families.

I am thinking of our refuse collectors, delivery drivers, shop workers, shelf stackers, cleaners and others who kept the country running. I am thinking of workers in the social care sector—low paid and so often stigmatised—working at the sharp end of the pandemic in our care homes. These unsung heroes deserve real recognition. Perhaps next time we discuss low pay and minimum wage, we will remember how much we owe all these workers who make Britain tick. I want to give a special mention to Britain's postal workers, who have played a special role in supporting our communities—not only delivering the post come rain or shine, but looking in on

the vulnerable, raising the cheer of isolated and lonely people and being a friendly face amid uncertainty and fear. Britain's posties, we salute you.

Of course, we praise the 1.4 million of us who work for our national health service. So many NHS workers risked their lives to fight the pandemic, and so many have tragically died. Many more are left with the trauma of dealing with mass casualties. The latest absence figures from the NHS show that just under half a million days were lost to mental ill health in just one month alone. With infections continuing to rise throughout the country and the Christmas easing of restrictions imminent, how will the Government ensure that the NHS has capacity to cope in January? Staff are already burned out and exhausted by the virus. What plans do the Government have to support our NHS to deliver the care that patients need throughout January and prevent the NHS from becoming so overwhelmed that the vaccination programme is affected?

Staff across our health service are struggling, and they know that the adversity is not over yet. I want to take this opportunity to praise workers across the NHS: our ambulance drivers, nurses, student nurses, doctors, health visitors, mental health professionals, midwives, pharmacists, porters, receptionists, radiographers, physiotherapists, admin staff and healthcare assistants. Not only that, but I want to praise the cleaners, the kitchen staff, the gardeners, the dispatch drivers, the record keepers, the chaplains, the volunteers and so many others.

When I turn up for my shifts at St George's Tooting as an A&E doctor, I know that I am part of an NHS family in which every part relies on the others—a complex web of care and compassion. We as a country rely on them, so let us do more than offer them applause. Let us rebalance the system of wages and rewards in this country so that the most valuable people, such as care workers and nurses, are valued above shareholders and stockbrokers. I have mentioned our national character and our national health service. Both rose to the challenge admirably, but what about our national leadership? Her Majesty's official Opposition have maintained a consistent position: we will support the Government in tackling this pandemic, but we reserve our right to scrutinise decisions and ask questions on behalf of the people. That is our proper constitutional role.

We will be demanding a full public inquiry into the Government's response to covid-19, and one particular area that will require forensic dissection is ministerial decision making on procurement. On 18 March 2020, the Cabinet Office issued guidance on public procurement of personal protective equipment and other equipment to tackle the pandemic. That guidance noted that public bodies were permitted

“to procure goods, services and works with extreme urgency.”

By 31 July 2020, more than 8,600 contracts had been awarded, with a value of £18 billion.

Of course we recognise that there was a need for speed, but the National Audit Office reported that there is

“a high-priority lane to assess and process potential PPE leads from government officials, ministers' offices, MPs and members of the House of Lords”.

Many suppliers with connections to the Government and Ministers obtained lucrative contracts. One such supplier was PestFix, a vermin control company valued

at just over £19,000, which was given a contract worth £108 million for PPE that had not been properly tested. The House has heard of the case of Mr Gabriel González Andersson, who was awarded more than £20 million as a middleman between the UK Government and a PPE business founded as the pandemic took hold by Michael Saiger, a Florida-based jewellery designer. And the NAO showed that Stroud Conservative councillor Steve Dechan, who ran a small, loss-making firm, signed a £156 million deal to import PPE from China.

Those are just a few instances of a procurement scandal that will only grow as more of the truth emerges. The Prime Minister says over and over again that any Government would have done the same. He is wrong. He must not judge others by his own standards. This is a Government who have stretched the procurement rules to breaking point, overseen a bonanza for chancers, spivs and Del Boys, and wasted millions on the cronies and chums of Government insiders. Doctors and nurses were sent to the frontline without working PPE while profiteers lined their pockets. The truth will come out. The public will get the answers they demand, and the guilty men and women—the hard-faced men who have done well out of the pandemic—will be called to justice.

Now, we face the first Christmas alongside covid-19. Ministers must do more to explain the science behind their current plans for the tier system and their plans to relax the rules during Christmas. The PM says we must be “jolly careful”, but are his Government? Is the Minister aware of the advice of Professor Andrew Hayward, director of the University College London Institute of Epidemiology and Health Care and a member of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, who told the BBC that allowing people to meet up over Christmas amounted to

“throwing fuel on the Covid fire”

and that it would

“definitely lead to increased transmission”

and was

“likely to lead to a third wave of infection, with hospitals being overrun, and more unnecessary deaths”?

Is the Minister confident that the Government have done everything possible to avoid a third wave in the new year?

With today's announcement that London will be moved into tier 3 just a week before rules are relaxed, is the Minister confident that the Government can effectively communicate these three rule changes to the public in the next week? What assurance can she offer the millions living in London and the south-east of England who will be under the tier 3 rules on Wednesday that the measures taken will actually halt the spread of the virus and keep them and their families safe over Christmas?

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I have expressed my concerns in the House before about the Christmas policy. There is a lot of care going into looking at the data for the review of the tiers, and yet weeks ago, the Government announced a five-day relaxation starting on 23 December. What is the position of the official Opposition in respect of the Christmas firebreak? Do they now oppose that, are they still supportive of it, or are they abstaining?

Dr Allin-Khan: Everything has to be evidence based. We in the Opposition have been labouring under the misapprehension that the Government have control over the messaging that has been going out. The mixed messaging relayed day after day by this Government has left people utterly confused. That is why I am saying that we need assurances from the Minister and the Government that the millions of people living under these restrictions will in fact be safe over the Christmas period, were families still to mix.

Finally, we turn to the bright light at the end of the darkest of tunnels: the prospect of a vaccine. I welcome the news of new vaccines, and I praise all the teams who delivered them and the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency for its efficiency. We all have a duty now to explain that vaccines are safe, vaccines work, and if and when people are offered one, they must get vaccinated. When I am offered the vaccine, I will eagerly join the queue, not just because I am a doctor but because I have seen the tragic consequences of this disease up close. All of us in this House must speak up for the science and against irrational conspiracy theories and malign myth making, and we must get our people vaccinated.

Is the Minister satisfied that the Government are doing enough to build public confidence in the vaccine? Is she confident that we have the infrastructure to roll out the largest ever mass adult vaccination programme? What about those in tier 3—people in Derby, Leicester, Nottingham, Tyneside and Teesside, Lancashire, Manchester, Birmingham and the Black Country, Hull, Yorkshire, Bristol and, soon, London? Will they get the vaccine quickly and efficiently? What plans have the Government made to deliver the vaccine for tier 3? Can the Minister update us on the position of vaccinations for people in care homes? People were promised a vaccine, and they need reassurance that they were not given false hope.

As we near the end of a terrible year, let us reflect on the strength, resilience and genius of our constituents, on the communities that came together, on the values of solidarity and compassion that unite us and on our common resolve to make 2021 a better year for all—especially the bereaved, the lonely, the vulnerable and the people who saw their worlds turned upside down by this terrible disease. They deserve a Government on their side, yet millions feel let down and left on their own. In 2021, that must change.

6.37 pm

Adam Holloway (Gravesend) (Con): First, I thank the care home staff and NHS staff in my constituency, particularly the medical staff at Darent Valley Hospital and Medway Maritime Hospital, who I know have their work cut out for them at the moment.

I would like to again bang the drum for the hospitality industry. If we believe that the main drivers of infection are hospital and care home settings, schools and households mixing within family homes, should we not be doing everything we can to avoid such household mixing? Regrettably, I firmly believe that many people in this country, unable to go into bars and restaurants, are mixing in unsuitable conditions in other people's homes. We have seen since the end of the first lockdown the extraordinary and incredibly expensive efforts of the hospitality industry to make preparations to minimise

the risks to their staff and customers and to stay afloat as businesses. When I look at establishments owned by friends of mine such as the Iron Pier brewery in Northfleet, the Griffin Inn in Fletching or TJ's pub in Gravesend, I see that the driving principle of customer service for them since the first lockdown is the safety of their customers and their staff.

We have seen no evidence at all to confirm that people are more at risk in pubs than in private homes or more at risk congregating in well-run hospitality establishments. If we are knowingly going to crash the businesses and the life's work of so many entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry, which we will be doing by knowingly restricting their ability to trade in the run-up to Christmas, when trading this month might actually save many of them, it would be nice if we could at least provide some evidence to support that.

Steve Brine: Does my hon. Friend share the concern of many Members in this House about so-called wet pubs? The Bakers Arm in Winchester contacted me this morning to say they are finding it difficult to take seeing the bustling high street all around them and people sitting outside coffee shops drinking cappuccinos, yet people cannot buy anything from their businesses. They are literally going under. Does he have that same problem in his constituency?

Adam Holloway: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I said the other day that the last time I went into the Compass Ale House in Gravesend, it was literally like putting myself under the control of a manager saying, "Sanitise your hands. Do this. Do that. Sit down. Don't do that. Why have you taken your mask off?"

I am absolutely not suggesting that pubs open as normal—in fact to the contrary, and that is the point. They are ready to operate safely in the new normal that they have arranged at such huge cost. I suggest a well-run pub is a safer environment for people to meet their friends than their front rooms, but like everyone in Whitehall and across the country, we have absolutely no idea either way. It is just a hunch.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): To assist my hon. Friend, he may be aware there was a report out based upon some work in south-east Asia. That seems to have been the basis of this risk assessment for hospitality, and it was not long ago that Public Health England itself said that potentially only 5% of infections were caused in the hospitality sector. I share his concerns, and I am sure he is critical of the risk assessment, just as I am.

Adam Holloway: I wish I had spoken to my hon. Friend last night when I was looking for precisely that research. There is absolutely no reason why councils and the police cannot be given draconian powers to shut down establishments that are operating unsafely.

My second point is that we are looking forward to the Christmas relaxation of the rules, which I know will be hugely welcomed by hundreds of thousands of families across the country who have had it very hard over the past few months. At present, the virus appears to be circulating among school-aged children and their parents. Thank heavens that is usually without serious effect, although we have had many tragedies.

Over the Christmas period, people have been told that they can mix and that generations can mix. I strongly suggest to my constituents that while we may be allowed to do so, some might choose not to. It strikes me that there is a great risk of parents and children passing on the virus to grandparents, leaving the country in a very poor position as we enter the coldest months of the year, when transmission rates will inevitably be highest.

After the extraordinary foresight of the Government in securing the vaccines and with the likelihood soon of many, many millions of doses of the Oxford vaccine coming online, I suggest that while families are allowed to do something, it might just be better to wait another four or five months. I know a lot of people are talking about Australia at the moment for some reason. My constituent, Mr Hamilton, suggests that some families should consider, like Australia, celebrating together towards the beginning of the summer, once the vaccines are rolled out and we are out of the worst of the winter. We may be allowed to do things, but people should listen to the Prime Minister and be very careful.

6.43 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Allow me to begin my remarks by sharing the sentiments that have already been expressed about our gratitude to everyone who is currently working to keep us safe and comfortable in our homes, whether that is the NHS workers toiling tirelessly or those in the care sector or, as we have heard, the posties. I thank everyone who is keeping the wheels of society turning to make sure that our lives can go on as normally as possible in what have been deeply abnormal times.

The first vaccinations have taken place in Scotland in care homes this week, which is a tremendous source of optimism. The first care home resident in Scotland to receive the vaccine was 90-year-old Annie Innes. Annie worked as a carer herself for over 14 years and has been living in the Abercorn House care home in Hamilton for six months. Out of much darkness over the last few months, that gives us at least a glimmer of hope—not just that we will be able to see our relatives in care home settings again, but, more generally, that normality is hopefully not too far away.

I would like personally to thank everyone who has been involved in the roll-out of the vaccination programme. If anything gives us hope, it is this. I absolutely concur with all that has been said: when the vaccine is available, please, please, please get it. People should know that it is not just about keeping themselves safe; it is about keeping everybody around them safe as well. This is what will get us through this. There are obviously huge logistical challenges involved in distributing the Pfizer vaccine. It will be an extremely challenging task, but it will give us an additional layer of protection that none of us has had until now.

As more vaccines and different variants of vaccines become available over the coming months, it is the intention of the Scottish Government—in line with advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation—to continue with the roll-out, initially focusing on care homes, for older adults and carers, but also rolling out to other vulnerable adults, and, gradually, to the wider adult population. It is to be hoped that the roll-out marks the beginning of the end, but it certainly cannot be the end of our collective caution. We all still

need to do all we can to keep our loved ones safe, whether that is through restricting our unnecessary contact with others or just facing facts: wearing face coverings; avoiding crowded places; maintaining appropriate hygiene and social distancing; and ensuring that we self-isolate and book a test if we have symptoms. We all need to continue to observe that public health advice.

In Scotland, the R number is now currently estimated to be between 0.7 and 0.9, which is confirmation that some of the very tough decisions that have had to be taken over the last few weeks have been having the desired effect. As a result, some 16 local authority areas have been able to reduce from level 3 to level 2, but there is a real need to remain vigilant throughout and not let our guard down, even as the Christmas period comes.

I draw particular attention to one allocation of resource that has taken place in Scotland that I hope the UK Government might take on board: a payment of £500 that is available to those who are on a low income and who have to self-isolate. The Scottish Government are going to maintain that, but it does mean that anyone who is required to self-isolate is not placed under any financial pressures to not do the right thing. From the position we occupy, it can sometimes be easy to miss the very real day-to-day pressures that people face, such as choosing between doing the right thing and doing what they need to do to support their families. If we take that problem away from them with a small amount like that, it can make all the difference—not just to those families, but to curtailing the spread of the virus.

Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance in Scotland announced details of how a further £2.2 billion of support will be allocated. It includes an additional £600 million for the health and social care sector, wider public health initiatives and welfare support, a £500 bonus for health and social care workers, and funding for a winter plan for social protection that helps people to pay for food, heating, warm clothing and shelter. Second in that package is support for business and the wider economy, including funding for local business support packages, a hardship fund for the newly self-employed who have not received support through any other means, and local authority discretionary business funding. A further £500 million is there to support transport services, and to cover pandemic-related income shortfalls in organisations such as the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service and Police Scotland. There is £15 million for the second part of that newly self-employed hardship fund, and £15 million to support the wedding sector and its supply chain, including photographers.

The hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) mentioned hospitality. All aspects of the hospitality industry are crucial. It is not just the jobs done and the employment created, but everything else in the supply chain: the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. Those are the businesses we need to and can support through the financial support we make available. Those grant schemes, and many more that I do not have time to go into, will be available for application from January.

The Treasury made it very clear that the funding that has come to Scotland is to cover the period up until March, which means that the Scottish Government have held back £300 million. I can understand that people might be frustrated about that. Every year, covid or not, we go through the ritualised pantomime of Opposition politicians saying, “Why didn’t you spend all your money?”

[Richard Thomson]

Frankly, the Scottish Government have to operate within a fixed budget. They have no borrowing powers. If they had borrowing powers, they might not need hold that money back and those numbers could be increased to other areas where support has not been able to be forthcoming.

I would add at this juncture that the £300 million that has been held back also has to cover any contingencies arising from anything that may or may not be decided in terms of the ongoing Brexit negotiations. It would be remiss of me not to say at this point that, with just over a fortnight to go until the end of the transition period, it is astonishing that we still do not know what it is we are supposed to be preparing for.

A no-deal Brexit would pose a very, very significant threat indeed to the NHS as it prepares to face the most challenging spell of the year throughout the winter. That is when the NHS is under its greatest strain and when demand on resources is at its greatest. To couple that with the impact of a no-deal Brexit would be an act of wanton recklessness.

Whether it is a low deal or a no deal, one of the main concerns for the NHS must be to ensure that sufficient drugs and medical equipment continue to arrive in the UK throughout the winter. The Tories' extreme Brexit plans are posing a threat to that, with many experts and industry leaders acknowledging the disruption at the borders that will be the effect of leaving the single market and customs union without a deal. The Government's own documents, which reached the press, suggested that the flow of medicines could initially be reduced to 60% to 80% over that initial three-month spell. I can only imagine the anxiety of families reliant on medicines for vulnerable children and other vulnerable family members not having the certainty and security that the supply can be maintained over the weeks and months ahead.

Many people will be facing a lonely Christmas this year, notwithstanding any seasonal relaxation of travel restrictions, but how much more difficult must it be for those who are facing that Christmas without financial support to put food on the table, to keep heating on, electricity in the meter and to keep their family warm? I again make the plea that there are so many people who have been excluded from the Government's financial response that the Government need to look at that again.

In conclusion, I observe that the rise in the rates of infection in London and the south-east shows just how easily the virus can spread anywhere. It is a cautionary warning that we need to maintain our guard. The vaccine gives us hope, but it is the solidarity that has been shown between individuals, communities and their families which has sustained us in the months past, and which will continue to sustain us in the months ahead.

6.53 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I want to start by giving my thanks to all those people working in the NHS and all the key workers for the incredible job they have done throughout the pandemic.

The Government are facing quite a dangerous situation where many see their tier system as neither effective nor fair. Conspiracy groups are popping up across the country,

spreading lies and misinformation through social media. In fact, as quickly as social media giants stop them, they seem to find a new way to spread their misinformation. In my previous speech, I called for transparency on how decisions are made and said that transparency is the only way to defeat conspiracy theories, but the Government are still failing to provide it. I am going to quote from an answer to a written question I asked about how tiers are decided. I asked the Secretary of State for Health when he planned to publish the scientific evidence used to determine which areas are under tier 3 covid restrictions. The response I had was that decisions on tiers are based on

"the case detection rate...in particular, among those over 60 years old; how quickly case rates are rising or falling; positivity in the general population; pressure on the National Health Service",

and so on. The important line that I want to draw to the Minister's attention, which is feeding some of the disquiet that I sense in my constituency, is:

"As decisions are informed by a range of factors, it is possible for variation between individual factors when comparing areas."

That fuels the sense that somehow the rules that many of us are experiencing up in the north are different from what people are experiencing down in the south. Why is there a possible variation between individual factors? Surely the Government have criteria that apply to everybody, regardless of their postcode or the place they live. That is how we have fairness, transparency and trust in Government, which is currently lacking.

People in Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle have been working hard to get the virus rate down. The East Riding seven-day rate is now 125, and Hull's is 195. That is 75% lower than the peak on 16 November, and that dramatic drop is because of the hard work of people from across the constituency, despite the harm that having to follow all these rules is causing the local economy.

We are a face-to-face economy. When looking at the reasons why we had that sudden, huge growth, we have to look at the jobs in which people are employed. Many people's jobs in Hull require them to go to work. They are not jobs that can be done remotely or at home. There is more need for self-isolation—again, I made that point to the Minister in my previous speech. If we want people to do the right thing, they should not suffer financial consequences for doing it. We need to look at the isolation payments of £500 that are reaching so few people.

I really hope that our declining rate is looked upon favourably when a decision is made about which tier to move us into. A 75% drop in a few weeks shows how determined we are to move out of tier 3 and into tier 2, but we need clarity. What are the criteria? What is the goal? Tell us what we need to do to move out of tier 3, and we can focus on making sure we do it.

The Government cannot leave us in tier 3 over the Christmas period without extra support. It has been an uphill battle to get any support for our area. I have said to the Minister many times before that we will not be the forgotten city, which is how many people in my constituency feel right now. Although furlough is protecting jobs, which is good news, it is not protecting businesses. Businesses tell me that furlough is going to continue after their business has failed. If the businesses have gone, what is the point in continuing the furlough until March?

Pub landlords are furious, and they have every right to be. There are 334 pubs in Hull, and landlords are seeing their life's work destroyed and their industry go under. Many pubs will not open, but they are a vital part of our communities. Landlords spent months adapting to the Government guidance, ensuring they are covid-safe, closing at 10 pm and spending an awful lot of money, and their reward has been inadequate financial support. They see people crammed down Oxford Street in London, pushing past each other and not wearing masks, and all the time they are told, "You are not safe enough to open." They are angry. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) mentioned, they see the Government wasting money on PPE contracts, and they are told that there is nothing extra to give them. That fuels the sense of injustice and unfairness.

The £20 a head business support grant is a one-off payment, and no account has been taken of the amount of time that restrictions may be in place in an area. That is putting an indescribable amount of pressure on business owners, who have no idea when they will be allowed to open. That is creating a gulf in support across the city. How is it right that businesses in tier 1 areas have received the same package of support for a 28-day national lockdown as businesses in tier 3? We have already spent weeks under the tightest restrictions, and there is a feeling of unfairness. Surely we need to look again at the discretionary support that is being provided for businesses in tier 3.

This pandemic is not an equaliser. We did not start from the same position, and it has not impacted everybody equally. We started from a weaker position because we had a decade of cuts and underfunding. Hull is one of the most deprived areas in the country. Our claimant count is now over 11%. I have mentioned this before, but between 2009 and 2019, on this Conservative Government's watch, real wages grew by 1%. The Government can repeat their mantra, "Oh, we're levelling up" as many times as they want, but we need deeds not words. When are we actually going to see some action? Six years ago, we were promised a direct rail route from Hull all the way to Liverpool—six years ago, but we are yet to see it anywhere.

I like to be an optimist, however, so I say to the Minister that I am still hoping for a positive reply to the Hull and Humber NHS trust request for new mental health facilities in the city. I hope that when she looks at the relative areas of need in Hull, she will look favourably on that request, because our hospitals have been hard hit.

I have mentioned the 334 pubs, but there are 131 restaurants unable to open and 109 cafés. Some 574 businesses in total are potentially going bankrupt, with people's life's work destroyed. We have mentioned the excluded, and I draw the Minister's attention again to Charles Cracknell and the young entrepreneurs who have missed out on any funding throughout this pandemic.

I have a few other businesses to highlight. Hotham's Gin School and Distillery is suffering terribly. It is a place where—when it is open again, everyone is very welcome to come—people can make their own gin, sample it, taste it and take it home at the end. It won a silver award for having the second best customer experience in the country under VisitEngland, but it is unable to open and facing huge costs without the support needed from Government to cover it. Events Made with Love, another events company, organises and supports weddings.

It ordered everything for an event before the second lockdown was announced and everything had to be refunded to the customer. That is another business.

There is Lion Heart Hot Yoga studio—I made the request directly to the Government, "Why were yoga studios excluded from being able to open and yet other areas able to do so?" Again, it does not seem to make sense to me. Where is the logic in that? Fancy dress companies are not seeing any business through Christmas and did not see any business through Halloween, missing out on their busiest time. These are all small and medium-sized enterprises. They are not multinational companies with big pockets so they can pay their way out of this. These are small, family-run companies seeing their businesses destroyed.

I wrote to the Chancellor on 7 December asking him to look again at the discretionary support grant applied to Hull. I have had no reply yet. We are not asking for special treatment; we are asking for fair treatment: compensate us for the length of time that we are spending in tier 3; apply the same judgment to our data as the Government are applying to other areas of the country when deciding which tier we should be in; compensate us for the weaker position that we were put in by this Government at the beginning of the pandemic; give our businesses the support they need to survive; stop people who are trying to do the right thing facing financial penalties; look at that self-isolation payment; give us the support we need to roll out the vaccination. People in Hull West and Hessle are resilient and determined. All we are asking for is our fair share of support so that we can build our own recovery.

7.3 pm

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): I am one of a number of colleagues speaking from the Government Benches this evening who was elected for the first time a year ago. On that joyous night, I do not think any of us foresaw quite what we were about to face over the past year. I hope that we have done our best and served our constituencies to the best of our abilities, but it has been a sharp learning curve, and I certainly did not expect to have to start a speech a year on saying that I send my sincerest condolences to those who have lost their lives in my constituency and elsewhere over the past year. It has been a time of tremendous challenge and one that I hope I never have to live through again.

There have been a number of covid debates over the past few months and I have not always been able to get on to the call list, so Members should forgive me as I add my general thank yous to so many people who have stepped up and done amazing things over the past few months. I include, of course, our NHS workers. My constituency is blessed to be served by three fantastic hospitals: Chesterfield Royal Hospital; King's Mill Hospital; and Bassetlaw Hospital. The overwhelming consensus is that those three hospitals have been absolutely superb and have served my constituents and others with tremendous distinction. The care home staff, many of whom I have spoken to, have done such wonderful things. Let me mention in particular the care home managers who were so forthright and so determined to keep their homes safe. Some of the most emotional phone calls that I have had over the past few months have been with those care home managers who have taken on this project so passionately and so personally.

[Mark Fletcher]

I pay tribute to the community groups and volunteers who have stepped up and served so selflessly. They have made sure that people have had food to eat and people to talk to and have done such amazing work. I also pay tribute to all those who have shielded and who have sacrificed themselves to keep safe. Then, of course, there are all those who have kept working as well. We so often forget those who have kept going, so I pay tribute to those in manufacturing jobs; to the shopkeepers who have served their communities; to the supermarket staff; to our rubbish collectors; to our council staff; to our postal workers; and to so many others. There are too many to mention and to list, but it has been a profoundly moving experience to hear so many wonderful stories.

This has been a challenge for our nation, the like of which I have not known in my lifetime. It was back in February and March when what was happening with this virus really dawned on us. The news was filled with so many stories about having to start testing, and then having to secure PPE. It is quite amazing how far we have come in that time. The fact is that we now have national producers and manufacturers of PPE, which effectively means that we can be self-sufficient. We have warehouses full of the stuff to protect our NHS workers and it all happened in such a short space of time. Then there is the fact that we can now carry out more than 500,000 tests every single day. I remember when we were carrying out about 1,000 tests and when 100,000 tests seemed a mile away. There are so many people who have been involved in making that happen. Again, the list is too long to mention, but we must not lose sight of how far we have come.

Then, of course, we have the vaccine: to think that we have so many vaccines ready to come down the track, as long as we get the approval; to think that we were the first country in the world to approve a vaccine; and to think that, last week, we started getting that vaccine out to people across this country. What a moment of hope and pride that was for this country.

So much nonsense has been written on social media and allowed to circulate about this vaccine and about its so-called evil effects. I am sure that Bill Gates is over the moon that he controls us all, day in, day out, but we must not let that nonsense put people off from having this vaccine, because it will save lives. Everybody who can have it, should have it. It is incumbent on every Member of this House and every right-minded person to say, "That is absolute nonsense. This vaccine is safe." It has been tested to the highest possible standards, and we should not circulate anything other than that—sorry, Mr Gates.

We should also remember our economic support and quite how much has been pumped into our economy. The level of Government action and support that we have seen over the past few months is unprecedented. I appreciate that there are Members in every part of this House who will say, "What about x sector, what about y sector?" I have tremendous sympathy with some of those arguments, but we must not lose sight of that bigger picture.

I share many of the concerns raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway), because there are two particular sectors that need highlighting. One is the events industry and the other is

pubs and hospitality. I agreed with the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) when she said that pubs are at the heart of northern and midlands communities, and that they play a special role. We are asking certain industries that are reliant on people coming together to suspend that for the moment, which is a tremendous challenge. We need to look at those particular industries again and question whether we are doing all that we can for them.

We had a wonderful moment in Derbyshire on Saturday, when the Government announced the local authorities that will begin community testing. I am incredibly grateful to the Minister. I have spoken to her and several of her colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that we get community testing in Derbyshire. The plan at the moment is that Derbyshire County Council will roll out five testing sites across Bolsover. This is a vital step in making sure that we eradicate the virus locally. Lateral flow tests have an important role in that.

I cannot thank the Department enough for its proactive engagement. I place on the record my thanks to Derbyshire County Council and my fellow Conservative Derbyshire MPs, who worked together consistently and for very many hours over the past few weeks to ensure that our bid was as tight as it could be. The fact that testing is being rolled out in the next couple of weeks says an awful lot about the quality of the bid that was put together. It is a hugely important step for my constituency.

It is hard to overstate how difficult this period has been or the sacrifices my constituents have made to help us get the numbers back down and to help us in our bid to get into tier 2. I doubt there is an MP in the House who does not want to get out of tier 3 if they are in it. I understand that the Government will look at a wide range of data. I spoke to the Minister last week about my hope that the data will be made publicly available and that the decision will be made as transparently as possible. I also understand that the Department is rightly filled with a cautious bias: it understands that Christmas is coming and that that might have a certain impact, so it wants to take the safest possible course of action. However, I am sure I speak for all Derbyshire MPs when I say that we are desperate to get out of tier 3. I imagine that will be heard from other Members.

Finally, I want to touch on the impact this period has had on people's mental health. It is hard to overstate the impact that taking away people's daily routine and normal social contact has had. Those intimate moments that people have with their friends and family have been replaced with a climate of fear and uncertainty—fear of catching the disease and becoming ill; fear of what might happen if one of their relatives or friends catches the disease.

It is striking to find how many people I have talked to seem to have been impacted by this period. We are very lucky in that we get to come to this place of work. Many people have not had that and have spent many months being incredibly scared. I spoke to one young lady in my surgery on Friday called Cara, who spoke passionately about her love of ice skating. Not having ice skating in her life had taken away her entire routine, her social group and the structure that she is used to and loves. That is just one example of many conversations of that nature.

Yes, the Government have done remarkably well given all the circumstances; yes, I would like pubs to get more support; yes, the vaccine offers a source of hope that we all need, but I think we will be living with the mental after-effects of this disease for some time to come.

7.13 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): With the Health Secretary's announcement today, there will rightly be a lot of focus on the spread of covid-19 in the UK and the questions it raises about the effectiveness of the Government's tier system, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) pointed out powerfully. However, I want to use the debate to raise the impact of covid-19 across the world. Last week, the People's Vaccine Alliance—a collection of organisations including Oxfam, Global Justice Now and Amnesty International—called for the pharmaceutical companies that are developing covid-19 vaccines to share their information and to waive their intellectual property rights to all vaccines, tests and treatments until the threat of the virus has abated. To do so would massively increase the global supply of vaccine doses and save countless lives. Now is not the time to put profit before people, and I would like to make clear my support for this proposal.

Through an analysis of data collected by Airfinity, the People's Vaccine Alliance has highlighted the dangers that an unequitable distribution of coronavirus vaccine poses. Its work has revealed that 67 of the world's poorest countries will be able to vaccinate only one in 10 of their population. In contrast, wealthier countries have acquired enough doses to vaccinate their population three times over, while Canada could potentially vaccinate its population of five times over. All in all, the most well-off states that make up just 14% of the world's population have bought 53% of the doses of vaccines most likely to be successful. It is so disheartening, and arguably dangerous, that 96% of Pfizer's doses have been acquired by wealthy nations. While it is welcome that 64% of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine has been made available to developing nations, it will still only be enough for 18% of the world's population. This is clearly not right.

Covid-19 has, sadly, shone a spotlight on the susceptibility to ill health of those in the most deprived communities, as well as the disproportionate impact of coronavirus on the world's poorest. In the UK, those in our most deprived communities have been about twice as likely to die as those in the least deprived. With this in mind, it cannot be right that the wealthiest countries have enough doses to vaccinate more than their entire population while the most impoverished nations are unable even to vaccinate their healthcare workers and their most vulnerable. In times of crisis, it is easy to panic and to look after our own, but the reactionary response is rarely the best one. In the UK, we are no more deserving of the lifeline that a vaccine offers than any other nation. In order to uphold our human rights obligations, we must ensure that there is equal access to vaccines across the world. However, an equal sharing of vaccine resources is not just morally correct, it is also beneficial to the UK. As the director of Frontline AIDS said:

"This pandemic is a global problem that requires a global solution. The global economy will continue to suffer so long as much of the world does not have access to a vaccine."

As a country, we cannot look to end this crisis simply by eliminating the virus within our own borders, because for as long as it exists, public health will be at risk and economies will be weakened.

I remind this House of our obligation, as a wealthy country, to the rest of the world. I urge nations from around the world to reject the pull of vaccine nationalism and to consider the world's most vulnerable. To those who say, "We must put British interests first", I say that beating this virus and reducing global poverty is a British interest. We must remember that when it comes to covid-19, none of us are safe until all of us are safe.

7.18 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): When I spoke in the general debate on covid last month, I accepted that the worsening statistics made it inevitable that England would face national restrictions, but in doing so I had hoped that Stoke-on-Trent would avoid tier 3. Sadly, that was not to be, given the rapid rise in cases and the pressures that our health system faced, and the new tier 3 that we are currently in is still more restrictive than what we had hoped to see.

Despite considerable progress locally, thanks to everyone's efforts in getting rates down in Stoke-on-Trent, daily case numbers still remain relatively high, and the seven-day rate threatens once more to rise to in excess of 300 per 100,000. It would be a huge shame if the city slipped back, given the great progress we have already made. We must keep our focus on what matters most to each and every one of us, whether our families, our jobs, our mental health, our children, our grandparents or whatever it might be, and that relies on us getting out of tier 3 and defeating covid as soon as possible.

We have achieved so much working together—we have gone from being one of the worst 10 hotspots to being not even in the worst 30—yet as we approach Christmas and community testing and vaccines are being rolled out, a minority of people might be on the verge of throwing away the hard-won advances from the whole city's efforts. Many families will be relieved that they can see loved ones over the Christmas period—many will not have seen one another for months—and many will want to see one another over this important period, but I urge people to be sensible and not take unnecessary risks.

The clear case we had hoped to see, and which we were close to seeing, for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire leaving tier 3 now looks unlikely. As a number of hon. Members have already said, we are absolutely desperate to get out of tier 3, but the sad reality is that it looks like we will have to ask for further sacrifices and resolution to control the spread of this awful virus. Our NHS has taken the brunt locally—especially the Royal Stoke—and we will never be able to thank the staff enough for all they have done. We must continue to get the virus under control and help our hospitals, NHS and care workers who have faced unimaginable pressures—often at great risk to themselves—to care for others. The only way we can do that is by keeping covid rates down, reducing the numbers needing hospital treatment and saving lives. We can all play our part in that.

What is especially needed now is to get the last leg of testing systems right and ensure we identify the one in three cases thought to be asymptomatic. I am pleased to see an expansion in lateral flow community testing

[Jack Brereton]

across Stoke-on-Trent and thank the city council and public health officials who made that possible for their work. They have done an incredible job. However, it is vital that the Government commit to expanding capacity further in Stoke-on-Trent over the Christmas and new year periods.

Alongside that, we are given hope, with the vaccination programme well under way, focused now on those most at risk and frontline health and care workers. It was hugely welcome to hear the deputy chief medical officer, Jonathan Van-Tam, suggest that through phase 1 of the vaccine roll-out up to 99% of covid deaths might be avoided. I know the vaccine roll-out in Stoke-on-Trent is progressing extremely well through the Royal Stoke, and it is starting in primary care facilities in our communities tomorrow. I am pleased to say that includes my own grandfather, Graham Brereton, who tells me he should receive a vaccine later this week.

There is much-needed light at the end of the tunnel, but it is vital to remember that we are still in that tunnel. We must continue to be vigilant and remember hands, face, space and avoid mixing households. Locally, in the weeks ahead we must focus absolutely on community testing and tracing and enforcing the restrictions to give us breathing space until the vaccine is more fully rolled out.

Thanks to the incredible advances of science, we are perhaps just a few months from returning to something resembling normality. I look to the Minister to tell us whether relative normality might be as little as 100 days away. Such a figure, if it is possible to give it, would really focus minds on how much longer the greatest sacrifices will last. We should not be restricting liberty, enterprise, socialising and leisure for a minute more than is necessary, but unfortunately right now—for a relatively short period of time—restrictions remain necessary. We see from Wales the risks of lifting restrictions too quickly, and with restrictions still in place—especially in tier 3—we must do everything possible to support our local businesses and protect jobs and livelihoods. I sympathise incredibly with all businesses forced to close and those that have had their livelihoods put on hold.

Covid has hit so many very hard. The extension of furlough to the end of March was hugely welcome, as was the extension of the self-employment income support scheme. For many businesses in Stoke-on-Trent, there has also been welcome grant support administered through the city council and loans for businesses that need them. Signposting support continues to be a top priority. The hospitality industry has been particularly hard hit, as has the events industry, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) mentioned, and retailers are losing out on what is usually the busiest time of their year.

I was pleased to see the Prime Minister announce an additional £1,000 for wet pubs recently. It will be vital to ensure that businesses indirectly impacted by the closure of hospitality, events and leisure are supported. My right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) and I will be meeting local businesses tomorrow to discuss their needs in the months ahead. I will continue to push for additional support where it is needed, to get our economy back on track.

It is at the local, everyday level that we will control the spread while we wait for the extraordinary science of vaccination, and improving treatment and testing will enable us to erase restrictions. We must be willing to enforce all measures in an even-handed and proportionate way, which I know has been the case across Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, with Staffordshire police doing an excellent job. In Stoke-on-Trent, successful enforcement action, from iteration of advice to closure and fining of those who have repeatedly broken restrictions, strikes exactly the right balance. That action is necessary and, importantly, is seen to be necessary, with the end goal of mass vaccination clearly now in sight. Regular reviews of which areas belong in which tiers are essential, giving us hope that we can drop down those tiers in the future. I cannot begin to emphasise enough the urgency of opening up again as soon as it is safe to do so, not least for our pubs, restaurants and the leisure industry, and all in our hospitality and those linked to it.

There is huge hope for the future, with the progress of vaccination and more rapid testing. In the meantime, it is vital that we stick with these measures and face short-term sacrifices to give time for them to be rolled out. I will continue to encourage people to get tested and to hold the line in this final leg of our efforts to overcome covid-19.

7.26 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I would like to start by remembering all those in my constituency, in Oxfordshire and across the country who have tragically lost their lives. The number of people dying at present is thankfully fewer than it was before—it is in the handfuls—but for every single one, there is a family who has lost someone just before Christmas. It is right to start by remembering them.

I am sure I speak for many when I say that I cannot wait to see the back of 2020. It has been the most ridiculous year in so many ways, but it has also given us glimpses of hope and positivity. In Oxford West and Abingdon, there are so many people to thank, because they deserve it and they are working so incredibly hard, but I will just name a few. I think of the Abingdon Bridge, a group that works with deprived young people who often have nowhere else to turn. Other Members have spoken about mental health, which affects all parts of society, but I am particularly worried about our young people right now—their loss of chances for the future and their feeling of despair, with many feeling that they have nowhere to turn. It is an incredibly difficult time.

It is a difficult time, too, for families. Furlough has, of course, been welcome, but far too many businesses are on their last legs. They tell me that if Oxfordshire goes up from tier 2 to tier 3 or, even worse, if there is a spike and we go into a national lockdown in January, they will have to close. The very last of their resilience is nearing its end, and those families are finding themselves relying on food banks such as the Cutteslowe Larder, the Botley Fridge and the Oxford Food Bank more than they ever have before. We must thank those volunteers, but we must also make the case for a sustainable way through this crisis. That is what those businesses crave—the stability. They tell me that they would prefer to stay in tier 2 longer than to open up too quickly and risk a spike, which is what we are seeing in some parts of the country now, sadly.

I am proud that many of the scientists who work as part of the Oxford Vaccine Group with Sarah Gilbert and her cohort live in my constituency. They are nothing short of heroes. When the vaccine is approved, as I am sure it will be, they will save lives, and not just in this country. Because this vaccine does not need to be stored in extraordinarily sub-zero temperatures, it will save millions, if not billions, of lives across the globe. Those scientists all deserve extraordinary thanks.

There are others who deserve our thanks. Oxford United have given facemasks not just to their fans, but to the wider community. I have never been more grateful to our local papers, including the *Oxford Mail*, and to our local BBC networks for covering these extraordinary moments of heroism locally. It has made me and, I am sure, others really appreciate the value of our local broadcasters.

I would be remiss not to mention organisations such as the Children's Air Ambulance, which has helped some of those most vulnerable families during this time. Of course, I also thank our local NHS teams, GPs, those who work in our care homes and our teachers, who have stuck on the frontline through thick and thin, and are desperate to be included in the first roll-out of the vaccine. That is my ask of the Minister: please encourage the Government to include teachers in that first wave of the roll-out; they desperately need it because they have been there throughout, looking after the children so that others could go to work.

Let me turn to the sustainable way out. It is not fair to say anything other than that the vaccine is the light at the end of the tunnel. It is what we all want to get to, it is how we are going to eliminate this virus. It is the way out, but as miraculous as the vaccine is, we are a long way away from that point. When the Government started hyping up the vaccine, I was disheartened to see in my own area—other Members may have seen this too—that people were thinking, “Oh, it's around the corner. People are going to get it in December and January, not appreciating that the scale of the task means that in reality we are not going to get there until Easter at the very earliest, and probably much later than that.

Let me tell the House a story from the Oxfordshire trusts today. GP surgeries in north Oxford were lined up to vaccinate the over-80s. They had called people and said, “Come—here's your appointment.” But at the 11th hour, NHS England contacted them to say, “You haven't quite got the right information in the right place. Computer says no. Stand everyone down.” The disappointment among my constituents was palpable. There was frustration in the clinical commissioning group and the GP surgeries, which had worked through the weekend and overnight to ensure that the vaccine was available. I say this not to apportion any blame, but to point out that these kinds of mistake will happen. There will be hiccups on this road. We cannot assume that this will be over quickly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that over Christmas there is an onus on us all, in and outside the House, to follow the rules of hands, face and space, not to invite extra numbers to our Christmas dinner, and to wear a mask and keep our distance when we go shopping? If we do all those things, then with the vaccine we can beat the virus.

Layla Moran: The hon. Gentleman could not have put it better. I am the chair of the all-party group on coronavirus. We launched a report a couple of weeks ago, and as part of that launch I said that, as much as we all feel the need to be with our families, what the Government are doing by relaxing the restrictions is a bit of a gamble, because we do not know which way the virus is going to go. I am sorry to say that every time that I have stood up in this place and suggested that there might be a spike in a few weeks' time, people have said, “Oh no, stop being such a naysayer. It's not going to happen.” We have to accept that every time we think that we have got one over on this virus, it wins.

At this point, it seems inevitable that we are going to face a further spike in January and that we are going to go up in tiers, but it does not have to be that way. The Government could follow what other Governments have done across Europe and be honest with the public about the likely outcome, making the point that they do not have to use the relaxed restrictions. Actually, because of where we are now, I think it is time for the Government to rethink those Christmas relaxations. I say that with deep regret.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Does the hon. Lady not agree with me that people will still mix in households at Christmas anyway? The purpose of relaxing the restrictions is to provide people with a legal framework, so that someone wanting to mix with four or five households might just stick to the three-household limit because the Government are saying, “Well, you can mix, but try to keep it limited.” It is about trying to help people and guide them into proper household mixing, as opposed to a free-for-all.

Layla Moran: I have a lot of sympathy with that view. If we look back over the last few months, whenever we have reduced restrictions, that has worked—it can work—but the problem we have is that, combined with the euphoria over the vaccine, we have the situation where people are not just going to mix with three other households, but may also bend the rules a bit around that, so we will end up right at the limit. R is just below 1: there is no headroom left. I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman is saying and I understand it, but my fear is that it is just not going to work that way.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I have to say that, from my personal experiences as the Member for West Dorset, the rates are continuing to go down. It has shown very clearly the levels of self-responsibility from the constituents in West Dorset. So would the hon. Member agree that actually, contrary to some of the points she made, there are indeed places throughout the country where the rates are going down and maybe where the tiers should be considered to be lowered, rather than maintained or increased?

Layla Moran: I thank the hon. Member for his point, and I can absolutely understand why, from his point of view, he might think that. What I would also say is that there were moments when we thought the south-east was going down, and now we have this variant and it is going up. What we do not know is how many people had been travelling from one area to the other or, indeed, what is going to come next, unless it were the case that the virus and R were going down in case numbers everywhere in the country and there was suppression.

[Layla Moran]

I will for a moment digress on the three steps that the all-party group on coronavirus suggested that the Government follow. One is control—control was the lockdown—which means bringing R below 1, so that there is some headroom. Yes, it is making use of test, trace and isolate, but it also makes the point that places that do have locally led test, trace and isolate programmes are doing better, and that needs to be followed absolutely everywhere. It needs to be something that we take very seriously, and if local areas need extra support and money to do so, they should get it.

Step 2 is the bit that is missing: suppress before we get to eliminate the virus, which comes with the vaccine. Suppress is characterised by all areas, by and large, going down in the tiers, but we have never seen that. As we have gone down in tiers, almost immediately the rate starts to go up again, and that is the problem. By releasing restrictions too quickly, we end up in this boom and bust situation with the virus, and that is what is so damaging to businesses. What we suggest is that we keep people in the lowest possible tier, but that the tiers are beefed up more than they are now. Bluntly, if we stay there for longer and are honest with people, that allows businesses to plan.

Then we move to eliminate phase, which comes with the vaccine, if we get to that point. That is how we see ourselves through in the short and medium term, not just in the long term.

7.38 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It is good to have the floor for more than the 180 seconds that was allowed in the debate before the last lockdown, which only gave us time to say our name and serial number.

I pay a very great tribute to the Government for what they have achieved. I think one of the crowning glories of what has been achieved in some of the testing data is the granularity of borough-by-borough data, which I will refer to that a little later. We have rolled out polymerase chain reaction—PCR—testing to a higher percentage of our population than anywhere else in the world. I had some doubt that we would ever reach 100,000 a day, let alone half a million, so this has been a real triumph in flexibility that our country has been able to achieve. We are now seeing the roll-out of lateral flow testing. Thanet schools will have the mobile testing units landing very shortly, as will other parts of Kent.

We have had a level of financial support that is almost unparalleled anywhere in the world. Of course, some businesses have not got what they thought they deserved, but we have to accept that this was new ground; we did not know what was around the corner and different support schemes had to be rolled out very quickly.

Then, of course, our own MRHA, the council that approves medicines, has rolled out at high speed but with absolute safety the first of the vaccines for licence around the world—the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine—and there are others coming round the corner. The one that we all hope for is the home-grown Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine—a rather more traditional vaccine, which is easier to store and administer. What is coming out of the billions that have been spent around the world in a

very short time is this new messenger RNA-style of vaccine. Once we are out of covid, there could be—maybe, doubtless, possibly—a similar type of pandemic in years to come, and we will be better armed to respond rapidly to it, so hopefully our planet will not be in this situation once more.

We look at the vaccines as the way out of this, but we have to tell some truths. Some are being rolled out as we speak: my father of 86 is getting his vaccine No. 1 this Friday, and tomorrow vaccinations are being rolled out locally from GP surgeries in my Thanet constituency. That is all great news, but there are 66 million people in this country, and we need two vaccinations. We have limitations on the delivery of the vaccines and there is global demand for exactly the same product, so we need honesty about how we will scale it up and deliver it. It is not just about the numbers; it is also about the availability of staff and those who are able to vaccinate. It is a major undertaking.

We must pay real tribute to the NHS staff who have stepped up to the plate, shown massive flexibility and kept the show on the road. We all have fantastic communities that have been looking after the old people in their streets, church groups that have done their bit, and food banks and similar organisations that have risen to the challenge. The Minister, who is looking at me intently, can be quite sure that that is the end of my unalloyed congratulations for where we have got to thus far. I still have a number of fundamental concerns about the moving science that we are living under, and I aired some of them in the previous debate.

We had the ridiculous situation that, as we approached lockdown version 2, we pretty much banned everything. We banned swimming, gyms, golf courses and non-essential shops. We had what I then called the Wilkinson conundrum: the big shops could open, but the small shops selling some of what the big shops were selling were not allowed to open at all. We could not have group worship. Thankfully, under tier 3 and tier 2—obviously, 99% of the country is now under tiers 2 and 3, and the whole of Kent is under tier 3—some common sense has prevailed. All those shops can open, and we can indulge in group worship and do quite a number of the things that we could not before. That indicates that there has been some granularity of thought about these things—funnily enough, exactly what I was saying some months earlier—and it determined that those things were not so dangerous after all.

I am not here to be part of the difficult squad. I know I am in the Covid Recovery Group. I am attempting to be a serious critical friend of the Government, but we still have our hospitality industry, which many right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned this evening, and I suspect that more following me will do so. I feel that, because we are getting somewhat desperate to get out of this mess, we are losing sight of what works and what does not work. I find it hard to believe that we will all be going Christmas shopping. I am sure the density in our supermarkets will be that much higher over the next 10 to 12 days, as we scramble around for the cranberry sauce and the turkey. That is allowed. The nail bars and the hairdressers, thankfully, are allowed. [Laughter.] Well, my nails are not looking too bad. But we are not allowed to go to a well-managed location of hospitality, and I just cannot see the sense of that.

I still have my concerns about the economics of tier 3 and lockdowns. I think London will suffer greatly over the next couple of weeks. We still have not really seen the analysis of what other deaths may be caused because people are too fearful of going to health locations. Macmillan Cancer Support said just this morning that lockdown version one is likely to have led to 50,000 people not seeking the help for an early diagnosis that they might have sought. That means that once they are diagnosed, their cancer may have advanced to a higher level and treatment will be more invasive, more expensive and more unpleasant—and there will be deaths.

I am not sure we are considering the effect on mental health sufficiently. I know that has been mentioned on the Floor of the House many times. There is not just one example, but I think very much of the multi-generational family business of some standing, with a bit of a status in the community, that goes bankrupt through no fault of its own. I worry about the likelihood of suicide in such instances.

Her Majesty's Treasury is very capable of modelling almost anything—it certainly tried to model Brexit over many years—yet it seems incapable of properly modelling the economic impact of these ongoing lockdowns. We had the spending review and the Office for Budget Responsibility report just a couple of weeks ago, which suggested that, at the mid-way point—a sort of tier 2 point—there is a permanent 3% scarring of our economy. Obviously, tier 3 has to be a little worse, if not a lot worse. As we have discussed on the Floor of the House over many years, there are reports from diverse organisations that say that long-term poverty, and the scarring of our economy that this will cause, will lead to worse life opportunities, fewer life chances and shorter lives. None of that has been factored in at all.

Let me turn to a couple of points that I hope the Minister will take away. I mentioned how useful the granularity of borough data has been. I think we all watch that avidly. Strangely, Thanet, part of which is in my South Thanet constituency, was at the very highest level of infection rates per 100,000 a few weeks ago, despite having been in the very lowest league at the end of the summer. I cannot explain that; I do not know why. We have our backs to the sea, and we do not have a community that mixes like a big city may. Thankfully, though, it is the only borough in the whole of Kent where the figures are now just on the way down. We are at 425 per 100,000 today, whereas we were at over 500 just a couple of weeks ago. That compares with a national average of 181.

My concern as we go forward is that we have seen that the tiers only get stricter. We have these five bases on which we are trying to interpret whether an area should go up or down. We have the pure numbers—that rate per 100,000, which we have all become very familiar with. I do not know what the threshold is between tier 1 and tier 2; it seems to be around 200, but I am really not sure. The shape of the graph is important: is it going up exponentially, or is it plateauing and going down? There are also the bases of the rate of infection among the over-60s, the most at-risk group for obvious reasons, and the positivity rate and whether that is going up or down. I have no idea about positivity rates—whether a rate of 2% is good or 10% is bad. Then, of course, there is the pressure on the NHS.

Concentrating on the pure numbers, however, I think that could be one of the tools by which we keep a lid on this—squash the sombrero and bide our time until we get to the vaccine. I do not know about any other Members in this House, but those numbers have really worked on me. At the end of the summer, when Thanet numbers were low, we had a spring in our step; we were not quite so worried—we were quite happy to walk down the high street to go shopping, and if we saw somebody without a mask on it did not really worry us too much. However, as those numbers have got to very high levels, I know that my behaviour has changed. If I see someone in the supermarket without a mask on—thankfully, it is a pretty rare event these days—I give them a very wide berth, of not just 2 metres but perhaps 3. I think we just do more careful things, too: we carry our hand sanitisers with us on a daily basis when our local numbers are high. I have the feeling that those numbers could be the most powerful tool in affecting behaviour.

Of course, the last of the five bases that we have to consider is pressure on the NHS, and I have a number of concerns about that. The community can affect the other bases—people can do something for themselves—but they can do very little, I am afraid, about what is happening in our hospitals.

I am very concerned. Last week a number of hospitals were reporting the percentage of their in-patients who had acquired covid within the hospital location. If our hospitals are under pressure, that creates more pressure for them. I find it hard to believe that this—the so-called nosocomial infection rate—cannot be solved. It was reported last week in *The Daily Telegraph* that 10,000 patients could have been affected, and we are all hearing about this. I am afraid I am hearing about it far too often; I hear about when patients go in for a routine treatment and are placed in a hot ward—in a mixed ward with others who are covid-positive. Last week, I watched ITV—national ITV—report on a situation at Medway Maritime Hospital. Few things really shock me these days, but this really did. A chap called Paul Tucker, aged 57, went into hospital with a serious condition that was nothing to do with covid and he died because he was in a mixed ward with covid-positive patients.

I can give another example, about someone I know: an old gentleman who broke his leg and went in for treatment. He came out solved, but he had had a covid test the day before discharge and no test result came forward. He went home for five days, and in those five days he had up to five carers attending to him every day—he is a gentleman on his own with no family living nearby—and on day five the hospital rang and said, “Ah, really sorry, but the test was a bit late: you're positive.” Five carers every day had been attending a man they thought was covid-negative, and those same carers would be going out to possibly 10 different clients on a daily basis. The declared hospital-acquired infection figures that we are hearing do not count infections that have been created by such new spider's webs because of a failure in a hospital. If there is a takeaway from tonight, Minister, it is that I beg you to get infection control under control in our hospitals.

I think I will leave it there, Madam Deputy Speaker, but these are serious times. We are not going to be out of this immediately or any time soon. Rolling out 66 million vaccines, times two, will take time. We need

[Craig Mackinlay]

to live with the virus in a sensible way, and going in and out of lockdown, with the damage to health, the economy and mental health, must form part of the balance sheet of how a nation deals with this infection.

I give the Government great credit for their achievements. They are world class. Very few nations in the world can say that they did it as well and as rapidly as we have tried to do it. It is all very well being the specialist after the event, saying what might have been or what we could have done that might have been better, but the world is not like that. I give top marks to the Government, but there are some takeaways that could make it even better before we are fully out of the woods.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. There is not that much pressure on time, but we have to be slightly conscious that everyone will want an equal go.

7.55 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Point taken, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you very much for calling me.

This has been the most peculiar of years. When we look at the media coverage of where we are with the virus, the vaccine, all the political issues that go alongside that, and the challenges over how the Government are handling things—well, badly or indifferently—many of us overlook what an appalling tragedy this has been and continues to be. Sixty-four thousand people in this country have lost their lives. Around 600 people or more in my county have lost their lives, and I knew dozens of them. One thinks about those people for whom Christmas will be not just lonely, difficult and challenging because of the restrictions we are all under, but a time of deep distress because they have lost someone close to them in the last nine months. When we see debates about the necessity of lockdown or restrictions of one kind or another, we need to remember what it is we are seeking to do: it is to save lives, and it will continue to be to save lives.

The tragedy that has hit my community, as it has every other community, feels almost too much to bear. We are a community where the average age is 10 years above the national average age in the United Kingdom. We are an area that, after London, is the next most visited place in the United Kingdom—the Lake district. Arguments are made about whether that meant that we had a higher than average incidence of the virus early on. We do not know that; what we do know is the way in which communities have responded to the virus.

In community after community, whether in our large town of Kendal, in Windermere, Grasmere, Ambleside and Sedbergh or in smaller places like Dent, Coniston, my own village of Milnthorpe, Arnside and Grange—everywhere I could mention in my patch, which is bigger than Greater London, and by the way I could mention another hundred—people have stepped up to take responsibility and have been desperate to meet the needs of their neighbours, though their own needs may be very significant. I pay tribute to every single one of them. I am proud to represent the south lakes and to represent those communities. Diverse though they are, they are also utterly determined to support one another.

There are so many within those communities who deserve our thanks and support, such as those working in care homes. I talked to one lady who worked in a care home, and not even a particularly large one, in my community. Back in April, on one night she saw nine residents lose their lives—in a single night. That was a tragedy for every single one of those people and every single one of those families. What does that mean? What does it feel like to be somebody who works in a place like that, administering love, care and concern for people as they go through their last moments? What is the cumulative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of people working in those communities?

We say thank you very often, and it is right that we do so in this place, but I want people who work in care homes, personal carers and those who work in the health service to know that we are not saying it glibly—we really, really mean it. We are utterly in their debt for the way they have cared for people at their moment of greatest need.

I think also of another group of people in a community like mine, where unemployment has gone up nearly sevenfold over the period of the pandemic: people who work for the Department for Work and Pensions in the jobcentre. They are people who serve people—people who perhaps were living in a state of relative comfort back in February or March, and then discovered that everything had collapsed around them. They are there for people at a moment of desperate need. They are not the only people, but I just want to draw them to the front of our attention. I thank those people on the frontline who have been supporting others who found themselves in need of benefits when they never thought in advance that they would.

I could say so many things about those who have stepped up to the mark at this time, but I also wish to pay tribute to those who have ensured that we have got to a stage where a vaccine is imminent—it turns out that we do need experts, after all. I am utterly indebted to those people, be they in this country or elsewhere, who have used their expertise and brilliance to do in 10 months what we would normally expect to take 10 years. Here is the thing that concerns me: we are close, potentially, to seeing light at the end of the tunnel and we can almost sense people beginning not to dip for the tape but to just let their guard drop. On behalf of everyone in this Chamber and beyond, I just want to say that this is the moment for utmost vigilance.

My dad was sharing that very thought with me the other day and he made the analogy with those tragic people who fell in the hours before the guns stopped on 11 November 1918. What a particular tragedy it was to be those who died at the end when the end was in sight. That is what we have ahead of us now, which is why if we need to tighten up restrictions over Christmas, miserable though that may be, we must think, “For pity’s sake, don’t we want our loved ones to see summer? Aren’t we prepared to make some restrictions now?” We know we are not going to have to live with this for years and years. We know that the light at the end of the tunnel is now visible. That is a glorious thing we can cling on to, but it is not an excuse to let our guard down—in fact, it is the opposite of that.

I want to encourage Ministers to think carefully about how the vaccine is administered. Of course, it should go first to those who are the most vulnerable,

and those working in care homes and in the national health service. I have talked about the scale of my constituency, so it is great that we are likely to have a centre in Kendal and in Windermere, and we are looking at centres being rolled out through the primary care network, through GP surgeries and the like. I encourage the NHS within Lancashire and south Cumbria to ensure that there are centres in places such as Grange-over-Sands and Sedbergh, and other more rural, remote parts of Cumbria, so that this is not hard to access, particularly for people who are older and more vulnerable.

A community such as mine, which relies so heavily on tourism, with half the workforce working in tourism, has been deeply hit by the coronavirus. We operate on a feast and famine basis in hospitality and tourism, with the winter famine and the summer feast, and then back to the winter famine. The problem for us is that we have had three winters in a row. The Government's investment in hospitality and tourism early on was of real benefit. Those £10,000 grants ensured that many businesses that would have failed were able to take advantage of the unlocking through the summer, so July and August were not a bad couple of months for hospitality and tourism in the lakes and the dales. I suggest to the Government that their failure at this point to repeat that grant support on that scale risks throwing away all the advantages they got from supporting hospitality and tourism in the early part of the year. What is the point of investing billions into it only to let those companies die in the next couple of months, so that when we are able to get back to some kind of normality, rather than having a hospitality and tourism industry ready to fight back and bounce back, we may have a bunch of dead businesses? So I encourage the Government now to repeat those £10,000 loans, to support hospitality and tourism.

I also encourage the Government to recognise the challenges faced in areas such as mine, which have been in tier 1 and are now tier 2, and are adjacent to tier 3 areas. The Lake District and Yorkshire Dales are in tier 2, but our neighbouring huge communities, the big population centres, are tier 3. So we are not compensated in the same way as businesses in tier 3 are, but we are massively affected by the fact that people in tier 3 cannot travel to take advantage of the wonderful facilities available in south Cumbria. I encourage the Government to consider making sure that support is provided.

Jim Shannon: With the advent of the vaccine for covid-19 almost here, does the hon. Gentleman feel that an extra push at this time for the goal of being covid-free should be what we all focus on? If we do that—collectively, singly and all together—we can make it happen, and that should be the positive message we are trying to send out from the Chamber tonight.

Tim Farron: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The fact that we know that the vaccines are now on their way surely changes how we look at all this. It means we now know we are not throwing billions and billions into a pot where we will never see the bottom. We know some kind of end is in sight, so what a terrible waste of tens of billions of the public's money it would be, were we to be penny pinching in the last part of this pandemic. That is why we should back hospitality and tourism, which is the fourth biggest employer in the

country and the biggest employer in Cumbria. It is essential to our economy as a whole and is worth £3.5 billion to the Cumbrian economy every year. This is the point; to invest in hospitality and tourism to see us through to the end.

In my community, there is a preponderance of businesses afflicted by having been excluded from support. Something like 4,000 people in my constituency alone were given no support. We are often talking about people who became self-employed in the past 18 months or so—the directors of small limited companies, hairdressers, personal trainers, taxi drivers and the like—but got nothing throughout this period. People on maternity leave have had their support cut at one end or the other. Often, these are the people—the entrepreneurs—who we will desperately rely on to build back our economy once we are through the coronavirus. Not only is it lacking in compassion for the Government to not back those people who have been excluded, but extremely stupid when they are the engine of our recovery, or at least they would be, if only the Government would help them.

A source of employment and a very important sector within my constituency and constituencies like mine is the outdoor education sector. It has been overlooked in many ways, although I am pleased to be part of the all-party group that the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) chairs, which is looking at how we can support outdoor education.

It is worth bearing in mind that about 15,000 people work in outdoor education around the country, and 6,000 of them have lost their jobs already, largely because residential stays have effectively been banned by the Department for Education under advice from the Department of Health and Social Care. I understand that, although I would argue that residential stays at outdoor education centres are at least as safe as children going to school in the first place.

It is important that we save our outdoor education centres, which are hugely at risk at this point, not only because it is right to save them, but because this is the moment to deploy them. I and others in this Chamber have talked about the impact this period has had on the mental health of young people and their disengagement with education. Those children have lost three months at school, but some of them went back two years as a consequence of all this. In our outdoor education centres, we have the skill and talent to engage young people in learning, to foster a love of learning, to improve their mental health and wellbeing and to engage them with the education process again. Will the Government bring forward a specialist package, as they have in Scotland, to make sure that we lose no more outdoor education centre jobs and protect all our outdoor education centres?

Finally, I will say a couple of words about health in general, but in particular mental health. In my constituency, we saw the closure of our adult mental health ward, the Kentmere ward, at Westmorland General Hospital for covid reasons. We understand why that is the case, and we are pleased that the foundation trust is now putting £5 million into redeveloping that service and opening again within the next year. I encourage Ministers to put pressure on the Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust to make sure that happens as soon as possible, and also to ensure that it remains a site to support people of all ages and all genders with mental

[Tim Farron]

health problems. It is incredibly important that we do not end up at the end of all this with a more exclusive and less accessible mental health service available in South Lakeland.

Finally, cancer. We have learned during this period that there is a backlog in cancer treatment of around 100,000 people. Cancer Research UK estimates that 35,000 additional deaths may happen as a consequence of covid through people dying as a result of cancer. We believe that for every four weeks' delay in diagnosis and, indeed, in treatment starting, we see a 10% drop in the likelihood of surviving that cancer. I want to encourage the Government to look carefully, if belatedly, at the comprehensive spending review submission that the all-party parliamentary groups on cancer, including the radiotherapy group that I chair, put to the Treasury, but which the Government did not match or fund. That proposal would allow us to massively expand radiotherapy, which would be a way not just of treating people who would normally expect to get radiotherapy but of ensuring that we substitute for those other treatments that are not possible due to covid-19. It would be an absolute tragedy if we ended up losing tens of thousands of people to cancer through this period because the Government did not catch up with cancer when they had the chance to invest and to do so.

8.10 pm

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I know that this is outwith the subject of today's debate, and the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), is no longer in her place, but I want to put on record my thanks to her for her work on changing the rules around blood donation for gay and bisexual men, as announced today. Her work and that of her predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), and the many campaigners on this issue means so much to gay and bisexual men. It will, importantly, boost our blood donations, and I thank her for that.

I want to start by expressing my sincere condolences to all those in Redcar and Cleveland who have lost loved ones to this awful disease. I also want to extend my thanks to our local NHS and care staff. Those at James Cook University Hospital and the Primary Care Hospital in Redcar have done so much, and many more lives would have been lost in Teesside without their tireless dedication over the last few months. I also congratulate Margaret Dixon on being the first person in my constituency to receive the covid-19 vaccine.

I wish to speak on two things in this covid debate. The first is the tier review on Wednesday; the second is our care homes and care agency staff. I know that other colleagues will be making similar pleas to the Department of Health and Social Care in the coming days, but I firmly believe that the people of Redcar and Cleveland have done their bit and deserve to move down the tiers this Wednesday. Some will argue that the ability to move up and down tiers should not be treated like a reward and that there should not be a recognition of the fact that areas have brought their cases under control, but what is the point in tiering if there is no ability to move up and down, and if instead we are locked into a tier indefinitely?

When I last spoke on tiering earlier this month, I described how disappointed I was that Redcar and Cleveland had found itself entering tier 3. However, when that original decision was taken, it was clear that it was sensible and proportionate, given the local data that we faced. As the Secretary of State outlined in his written ministerial statement, our cases were very high at 394 per 100,000 across the region, with positivity also very high at 13.3%. The case rate among the over-60s remained high at 292 per 100,000, and NHS admissions had remained high in November.

However, we are now some weeks on from that decision, and our position has improved greatly. Our case rate is down: in the seven days running up to 11 December, it was 131 per 100,000—a third of what it was when the original tiering decision was taken, and down by 7% on the previous week. Our case numbers for the over-60s have almost halved, sitting at around 150 per 100,000, down from 292 when we were placed in tier 3. Our positivity—the percentage of tests where the outcome is positive—is now 6.6%. This too has halved since the original tiering decision, and our local NHS admissions are down by 60% since their peak on 23 November.

As you can see, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am trying to paint a picture here. On every test set out by the Prime Minister on why areas can move up and down tiers, Redcar and Cleveland is performing. In two days, the Secretary of State will announce our new tier position, and I urge him to look at all this data, look at how we have improved and measure us against that. He has outlined today that London is to move into tier 3, and I fully support him in considering tightening restrictions in areas where cases are rising, but it cannot be that there is no reward for places where efforts have paid off. Many businesses in the hospitality sector are now down on their knees, and with that, those families are suffering. This Christmas will sadly not be much comfort to them in these times of uncertainty. Where stricter measures are put in place in order to bring cases down, those same measures must be lifted when they are not absolutely necessary, in order to bring some balance between saving lives from covid and saving lives from the consequences of economic suffocation.

Secondly, I want to touch on care homes. I pay tribute to all our care workers in Redcar and Cleveland. The Government have done a brilliant job in getting us to the stage where all care home staff can now get weekly testing. Still excluded, however, are care agency staff. I raised this matter in the House on 10 November. The response was that we want to step away from using care agency staff who go between multiple care homes during this period. That can still remain a goal, but our focus has to be on including them in the weekly testing regimes. I spoke to one agency manager who admitted that some of her staff had lied about symptoms to qualify for a PCR test, just so they could go to work, know they were safe and not infect care home residents. Will the Minister look at what more can be done to ensure that this issue can be resolved in the very near future? I would also appreciate assurances that care agency workers will not be overlooked in the roll-out of the vaccine, as they are just as much at risk as those who work in dedicated care homes full time.

Across Redcar and Cleveland, most of our care homes are saying that they will not be allowing any visitors before Christmas. I am surprised about that, given the

announcements the Government have made on lateral flow testing for care homes and other measures, such as including family and regular visitors in weekly testing. The Minister and I have spoken about that previously. Will she consider looking specifically at Redcar and Cleveland and helping us to discover what the blockages are in the system, to ensure that people can see their loved ones at this important time?

To finish, I want to recap on that all-important data: 131 cases, down two-thirds from 390; over-60 cases, 150, down by almost half from 290; positivity at 6.6%, down by half on 13.3%; and NHS admissions down by 60% since their peak in November. It cannot be that the same people who follow the rules and help to improve case numbers in their community, continue to be punished and their livelihoods destroyed when the risk of infection is now much, much lower. There has to be fairness in the way we deal with this crisis and we need to take into account all other economic, social and health factors that may also cause great damage if ignored. My constituents deserve recognition for the good results on the ground. I hope the Secretary of State and the Minister will look favourably on their circumstances.

8.17 pm

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I want to put on record my sincerest condolences to all the families in Hyndburn and Haslingden who have lost loved ones far sooner than they ever should have due to this awful virus. There will be a chair at the dining table that will be empty this Christmas because of it.

I need to say a huge thank you to the whole Department, the Secretary of State and Ministers for how responsive they have been throughout and for really listening to what we needed in Hyndburn and Haslingden. I know I have been pestering for quite a number of things. I have highlighted the specific needs of my constituents. One of those was for families to be able to visit their loved ones in care homes. This is a really, really important step, especially as some have not been able to visit since March. It has had a drastic impact on people's mental health, which we have seen deteriorate in care homes. It was announced that Hyndburn would receive mass testing. I also pestered the Prime Minister for that, so that is great, and the deployment of the Army so we can finally find those who are asymptomatic and break the chain.

We have faced restrictions since July. It has been a tier 3 area. It has been really, really tough. Vaccine distribution in east Lancashire is so welcome and it really is that light at the end of the tunnel that we have needed. We have seen a really positive drop in cases, and I echo everything my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) said. We were at 491 per 100,000 when we entered the new tier restrictions. In Hyndburn and Haslingden, and across Lancashire as a whole, we have seen a significant drop. Hyndburn's latest infection rate is 169 per 100,000 for the period 3 December to 9 December. That consists of 137 positive cases. Over the past week, Hyndburn's rate has gone down by 21.3%—the largest fall across Lancashire—and Rossendale saw a 14.3% drop in the rate. That is a really positive step for us locally, and I would like to thank everyone in our community who pulled together and followed the rules to protect all those we know and love.

With this drop, there is much hope across my community of the prospect of tier 2, which would enable parts of my brilliant hospitality sector to reopen their doors. I urge Ministers to look closely at the local data in Hyndburn and Rossendale when making a decision on tiers, because there needs to be a reward for all the effort that local communities have made. It has been so difficult, and my residents are fed up. To get to a rate of 169 from 491 in the space of two or three weeks is absolutely brilliant.

Unfortunately, my local police force has released a public statement today after issuing a number of fines related to gatherings in private dwellings. I speak to numerous residents day in, day out who are sacrificing so much to protect their loved ones and bring our numbers down, and it is so frustrating for them to hear that this is happening. I speak to my police force on a regular basis—its office is two doors down from mine—and it tells me about these situations. I desperately want to see an easing of restrictions, as do all the people who have made these sacrifices, but the only way to do that is by everybody playing their part. It is so frustrating for my residents to hear about these illegal gatherings at the weekend. It is really important that everybody plays a part in this.

The easing of restrictions over Christmas is welcomed by many, but it is important that everybody remains cautious and acts with caution, as I will be doing with my family. This virus is still here. We are still fighting an invisible enemy, and it is unfortunately still making families lose their loved ones far sooner than they should. I am questioning the use of PCR testing in tier 3 areas. The Eastgate testing site in Accrington is currently only for those with symptoms. It is brilliant that we have mass testing, but that site is not being attended enough. Opening it up to those who do not have symptoms would mean that people who need peace of mind over Christmas can go and get a test before seeing loved ones who might be vulnerable to this virus. When the capacity is not being filled at these sites, as has happened previously, that could be a good thing to do, especially in tier 3 areas, for those who are very cautious about seeing their loved ones over Christmas.

Over the past few weeks, I have visited many local schools and spoken to pupils and teachers, who still have serious concerns due to the number of pupils who are having to self-isolate numerous times. One headteacher I spoke to told me about a pupil who has had to self-isolate four times. I urge Ministers across Departments to continue to talk to local MPs and local schools about the effect that this disruption to pupils' education will have on their exams next year.

I want to thank everybody in my community for pulling together. Those in our hubs have worked extremely hard, as have the volunteers going shopping and our NHS frontline workers. I have been shouting about my community and how much they pull together, but they really are amazing. We have Pastor Anne at the Clayton food bank, who I visit. We have our local volunteers at the hub and those who have been going shopping for others who cannot get out, and we have our NHS key workers. It has been amazing, and I thank everyone in Hyndburn and Haslingden.

In my maiden speech way back in March when this began—before I started getting grey hairs at the age of 25—I said that, as a community, Hyndburn and Haslingden

[Sara Britcliffe]

would get through this. We have seen the light at the end of the tunnel. This is the hope that my residents need, and together, in Lancashire, we just need to keep this up. We need to remain cautious and we will get there. We have the prospect of the vaccine and mass testing, and I thank everybody who has contributed to getting us to this point.

8.25 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Thanks, hope, change—three positive words that it is lovely to use in this debate. I want to put on record my thanks to all the scientists, researchers, staff, communications guys and the Government for getting it right last week and getting a vaccine out there. It really is the game changer and the hope that we have been looking for. As has been said many times in this House, the roll-out will be slow and steady, and things are not over yet—not for this month, for next month or for the months to come—but there is light at the end of the tunnel, and we have the opportunity to start to get things back to normal and see the change that we want. I welcome the news of the vaccine, and more in the pipeline, because it is what everyone has been hoping for.

I welcome, too, the fact that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and Ministers, listened carefully when Leicestershire MPs said that we wanted to be decoupled from Leicester. That was not because of some form of covid nimbyism, but simply because we have had lived experience throughout the entire summer of what our people do, how they react and what goes on. I hope that Leicester gets as much support as possible to fight the virus, bring the numbers down and make a difference. With that in mind, if we are being led by the evidence, I would like to see a push for a borough-based model, based on our lived experience in Hinckley and Bosworth. As my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) rightly pointed out, if our constituents are following the rules and making the difference but the evidence is changing, so should the tier system. All we ask is to be given the power to do that. When the data comes through, I hope that will be the case.

A lot has changed during the pandemic. We talk about lockdowns now, but if we think back to what happened in March, we can see that the recent lockdowns and the tier system are completely different. The Government have rightly changed and focused their emphasis. They focused on the NHS, and on making sure it was not overwhelmed. More importantly, we were able to continue non-covid procedures, investigations and treatments. The Government then focused on education, and on getting kids back to school so that they did not fall behind. That, in turn, has allowed people to get to work, which was the third focus: opening non-essential retail and businesses. On the next level, leisure activities, the gym, welfare, getting out to see people and looking after ourselves mentally and physically have been prioritised. Those are all levers that we can pull but, alas, that means that socialising and hospitality come last.

Given that there is light at the end of the tunnel, however, change can happen. I would like to see support for the hospitality sector—for pubs and restaurants—in the short term to help them to get through, but let us not forget the other industries that will take the longest

to come out of this: events, conferences, the wedding industry and, of course, travel. I welcome the fact that the Government are making strides wherever they can and using the taskforce to help, and that is good news for those industries. We can now see where we want to go in April, May and June. We have the potential to lay out a plan, albeit in draft, so that we can say to these businesses, “This is what you can start to work towards.” As someone who got married last year, I know that trying to plan a wedding in a few weeks is not something that my wife would have wanted to do.

One thing that struck me when I was driving around from Newbold Verdon to Hinckley was how much life is starting to return to normal. It must be so hard for a pub or restaurant owner to see people going about their normal day-to-day working lives, but to be unable to make that change. We should keep that in our minds going forward to try to balance protecting the NHS and protecting livelihoods.

As we come to Christmas, and this is likely to be the last chance—I hope—to speak from the Government Benches before the new year, our minds are focused on that new year and the hope that is coming. Although I urge policy change, some things need to stay the same: caring for each other at Christmas. It is going to be particularly difficult for those who are choosing to isolate—lonely people. So we should pick up the phone, get on that Zoom or Teams call, and speak to neighbours, friends and families. Of course, the piece of Government advice that should never be lost and should stay the same until we have all had the vaccine is: hands, face, space, get a test.

8.30 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate.

Today’s actions from the Government are clearly well needed and well understood, particularly in those areas where the pandemic and covid is on the rise, but I rise to make the case for those at the other end of the spectrum—for areas such as rural Dorset, and indeed my constituency of West Dorset, where the number of cases has considerably reduced. I make the case and I make the plea to the Government that we look at more local tiering. At its western extremity, West Dorset is 55 miles from the main commercial centre of Bournemouth, which is influencing the tier that we are in. I am not sure that that is quite right. Indeed, I make the case for Dorset itself to be put into tier 1 at the Government’s review coming this week.

I have stood in this House on several previous occasions to make the case for a more local-tier approach. Earlier today, during the Secretary of State’s statement, my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) made very good and useful mention of counties such as Hertfordshire and Essex where the Government have been able to take that approach. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young), who rightly said that for those constituents who work hard and take self-responsibility for themselves, their families and their communities, and where there is a clear output of success, those constituencies and communities should be rewarded through proper scrutiny of the tiers to make sure that, wherever possible, the impact on civil liberties and the restrictions on our families getting together can be reduced.

Today in Dorset, we have 43.1 cases per 100,000, which is a considerable reduction on previous weeks. That figure is lower than that in Cornwall and the Isle of Wight when the decision was made to place those two areas into tier 1; they were at 58.5 and 56.4 respectively. On 12 December, one case of covid was reported in rural Dorset, while on 9 November, 85 cases were reported, so it is clear for all to see that there has been a considerable reduction in cases. On Friday, we had one patient with covid in Dorset County Hospital in Dorchester in my constituency. It is clear to me that Dorset has a very, very strong case for its tier to be reviewed, and I could not encourage the Minister strongly enough to consider that.

The good people of rural Dorset and, indeed, of West Dorset have been diligent. They have been self-responsible and respectful not only of themselves and their families, but of others in the community. I am particularly pleased that the Government have made huge strides with a vaccine. We in Dorset are blessed by Dorset County Hospital having a hub for the new vaccine. Indeed, to the north of our constituency, just over the border in Somerset, so does Yeovil District Hospital. West Dorset, I am certain, will be served well.

We also need to recognise the effect on wider business and our economy. Shops, pubs and breweries have very, very diligently taken that responsibility of being covid-secure. They have invested a lot of money. In many cases, it is safer for constituents in the community to be in those places than to be at home. We have 6,525 businesses in West Dorset, 97% of which are micro or small-sized businesses. It means that they face the most difficult of circumstances and, I am afraid, are the most affected by the situation, so it is incumbent on me as their MP to make sure that their voice is heard in this place.

On Friday evening, I went to Cerne Abbas—Members who heard my maiden speech will recall that I talked about the Cerne Abbas giant. There are many wonderful things about Cerne Abbas, and one of them is the small brewery there. When I went to meet the owner of the brewery, he told me very clearly that the business was in difficulty. There is no reason why it should be: our rates are very low, so we should be doing much, much more. In West Dorset, we have the independent Bridport Leisure Centre. We also have a number of pubs, but I am afraid that they have already started to close. Justifying to constituents the difference between pubs and the coffee shops that are open is incredibly difficult.

On Wednesday, we have a considerable opportunity—the Government have a considerable opportunity—not just to reduce the tier in rural Dorset, but to allow West Dorset to play its part in supporting the wider United Kingdom's economy when it needs it most. There is no reason why our economy should be constrained. We are more than happy to support the rest of the UK in its period of need. I cannot urge the Government enough to reduce Dorset to tier 1 in the forthcoming review this week, and I urge the Minister, if she needs any further information, to refer to the letter I sent to the Department on 10 November outlining a number of points and asking a number of questions. I am hoping that that will help her and her colleagues to make that decision.

8.37 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder). Covid-19 has affected each and every

part of our lives. It is a virus that is destroying our communities, our livelihoods and, of course, our way of life. I have spoken in this Chamber previously, on many times, about the impact that this virus and the associated restrictions are having on businesses, particularly on those in the hospitality sector and the other connected sectors, such as the wedding industry and the tourism industry.

The virus and restrictions are also affecting things such as gyms and dance studios, which, of course, under the restrictions in tier 3, which my constituency is in, are unable to hold classes indoors. I must pay tribute to Andrea Wortley, who runs a dance studio in my constituency. I have been to see her and can say that she is a great ambassador for the sector and has shown a real willingness to try to get her dance classes open again. I reiterate that directly to the Minister. I really want to put weight on this, because my constituency has been locked in local restrictions going way back to July, and many of my constituents are becoming increasingly frustrated, but we are trying incredibly hard. Our rates are now dropping at a great rate and I urge those on the Front Bench to look at the figures across the Bradford district, and across my constituency in particular, and to consider dropping it from tier 3 to tier 2, even if that means looking at a geographically localised approach.

Today, I want to focus on the extraordinary scientific and medical breakthroughs that have been made over the past year. They will form a crucial weapon in our armoury as we enter 2021. It is hard to believe that the first cases of covid were detected just over a year ago, but from technology to testing, treatments and vaccines, science is giving us new ways to beat this terrible virus.

It is remarkable how businesses are playing their part. Madam Deputy Speaker, you must come to my constituency because I have some great examples. We have been developing technologies to inactivate covid-19 on surfaces using far ultraviolet-C light emitted by krypton-chlorine lights. That technology is being developed by one of Britain's world-leading universities, St Andrews in Fife. Another business based in my constituency—in Ilkley—GermzAway, has developed a hand sanitiser without an alcohol base, which is kinder on the skin and just as effective. Many of our great manufacturing businesses across the constituency, such as Global Precision in the Worth valley, are playing their part in producing PPE and, on a recent visit, I saw the great work that they were doing.

We have seen safe, effective vaccines developed at remarkable speeds by scientists around the world, including at Oxford. Oxford University has created a vaccine for the world that is as affordable as a cup of coffee and as easy to distribute as any refrigerated food product. It is just waiting to be approved. For those who are unable to take vaccines, for example, because of severe allergic reactions, the UK is now trialling an innovative antibody cocktail to provide protection. We are seeing how rapid testing will allow us to open up new parts of society and the economy. Recently, it was incredibly moving to see the images of care home residents being able to hug loved ones for the first time since March, thanks to new rapid testing—lateral flow testing—coming through.

So progress is being made. We have heard how Birmingham is looking at a new test and dine scheme, potentially allowing a route to enable our hospitality sector to reopen. I urge the Front-Bench team to do all

[Robbie Moore]

they can to make this scheme work, as it would be hugely beneficial in my constituency, where the hospitality industry has been battered as a result of increased restrictions. Actually, if it does work, perhaps it could be rolled out to other industries as well.

In conclusion, science really is one of our greatest weapons in our armoury to protect us against this terrible virus. Going into 2021, there is light at the end of the tunnel. I pay tribute to all across Keighley and Ilkley who have done all they can—including our NHS, our care home workers, our teachers and our key workers—to fight this terrible virus. Yes, there is light at the end of the tunnel, better days do lie ahead, and I am confident that the next 12 months will be much better.

8.42 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore). I would like to take this opportunity to thank the people of North Devon. Throughout the pandemic, our rate of infection has remained below the national average, and that is thanks very much to their hard work in following the guidance throughout. I thank the community groups who have kept one another safe. In a rural community, those networks are absolutely vital. We do not have those great big meeting places where transmission is easy, and those small villages have held themselves together. I thank the social care workers and those working in our care homes and particularly our NHS for everything they have done and are about to do in rolling out the vaccine.

It is with regards to the vaccine that I, like the Secretary of State, shed a tear that morning when the news came through. I find it really quite moving even now to see that light at the end of the tunnel. However, I also emphasise to the Minister the importance that my community places on timely information about the roll-out of the vaccine. We have been waiting nine months for the vaccine and we know that we might have to wait a little bit longer, but just to know when it is coming would be a huge help for so many. My elderly population and many who have shielded are desperate to find out when they will be able to receive the vaccine. As it is rolled out, how will this dovetail with reducing restrictions? I hope that now that we have a vaccine, a plan will come forward. I am delighted to hear of colleagues across the House tonight whose elderly relatives have been able to book an appointment, and I very much hope that the same will be true for my residents in the coming days and weeks.

In addition to my concerns about the vaccine roll-out in North Devon, I would like to flag the plight of my local hospitality industry. This week, Devon as a whole is running at 71 cases per 100,000 and North Devon is a bit higher at just over 90. Whereas others have spoken about tier 3 and wanting to get into tier 2, my hospitality businesses say that tier 2 is the worst of all worlds and they would dearly like to get to tier 1. Unfortunately, with cases at 71 per 100,000, I recognise that my 146 pubs are unlikely to see that this week. However, I would like to propose perhaps a tier 1a or tier 2-minus for when we are clearly heading in the right direction. Please, is there any chance that our pubs, which are covid-secure businesses and were grateful for Eat Out to Help Out—a quarter

of a million meals were consumed under the scheme in my constituency with not one coronavirus case linked to them—could perhaps have the rule of six in a covid-safe environment? We are robust in North Devon. Could we sit out and have a drink without a substantial meal?

This Friday, I went and had a substantial meal in the lovely Quay Inn in Instow—it was a slightly isolated experience, being the only table in there at eight o'clock on a Friday two weeks before Christmas—having walked past the Wayfairer, the Boathouse and the Instow Arms to get there. Yes, I am lucky, my village still has four pubs, but all of them would normally be packed at this time of year and all of them were deserted. Therefore, while they are grateful for the support that has come to date, and they are delighted to be open, I very much hope they will still be open when we get through the worst of the pandemic.

I am told that my local tourism sector is down by 56% compared with last year and that up to 70% of my tourism and hospitality businesses are not sure they will still be there by Easter. The lack of planning is what they are finding so difficult. Now that we have that light at the end of the tunnel, I hope we can help them plan for next season. Only once we begin to exit this dreadful pandemic and normality is beginning to return—hopefully by Easter—can I hopefully revert to being the self-appointed one-woman tourist board for North Devon and welcome everyone back to my lovely constituency. Only then will we start to know how much of North Devon's tourism and hospitality industry remains. As we continue to balance lives and livelihoods, I very much hope that just a little bit more can be done to protect both in North Devon.

8.47 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Thank you very much for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. As the final Back-Bench speaker this evening with no votes on a one-line Whip, we could call this the graveyard shift, but I am grateful to be called.

Government policy in 2020 has been to strike a balance between conflicting priorities, and I publicly commend the Government for what they have done. For any journalists who may be watching, we are damned if we do and damned if we don't, but I recognise resilience, pragmatism and unwavering dedication, having done a few tough jobs myself, so it is a big tick for the Government from me.

The macro imperative this year has been to keep people safe in line with public health advice, and that is entirely right, but I want to sound a few notes of warning. First, the Government's support during the pandemic, notwithstanding the 3 million excluded—I am still concerned about them—has been excellent, with more than 1.5 million new claims of universal credit, 9.6 million jobs furloughed under the job retention scheme and claims totalling £41.4 billion. The massively generous coronavirus large business interruption loan scheme has provided 78,000 loans worth £18.4 billion, and we have also had £300 billion or thereabouts from the Treasury to support the country at this difficult time. It has got to come back. The important thing is that we as individuals need to learn to live alongside the virus and not hide from it, so we have got work to do to get back to normal, putting the money back into the Treasury and carrying on next year alongside the virus.

Christmas is welcome for all of us, and the Government's relaxation of rules over the festive period, which I welcome, does show how they understand how important it is to the mental health of the nation and how far we have come in a short period of time. Welcome steps have been taken with the launch of visitor testing, visits regardless of tier and indoor visits to care homes—the list goes on. I am grateful for what has been done, but these enhanced freedoms are effectively a gift; the risk of a third wave or further lockdown in the new year cannot be the price that we pay for losing our resolve and will over Christmas.

This morning I visited the Lexicon shopping centre in Bracknell. It is a fantastic example of what can be achieved—a £240 million regeneration project, supporting the “Christmas Wishes” campaign. The Lexicon is doing everything possible to attract shoppers into its fantastic set-up. I was struck by how vibrant and busy it was today; the car park was full and people were also parked on the high street. The important thing is that it was safe. People were wearing masks. Excellent measures were in place in shops and there was clear distancing down the aisles. I am really grateful to Bracknell Forest Council for everything that it has done to ensure that supporting our high street can be done safely. Given the very low rates in my constituency over the last few months, it would be easy to complain that Bracknell is being put into tier 2 rather than tier 1, but by the same token we have to be pragmatic, because the rate next door in Slough and Reading is much higher. Of course, our own rate in Bracknell is rising too, so there is no time at all for complacency.

I want quickly to plug Brants Bridge, which is a medical facility in my constituency. I really welcome that the Government are setting up a new covid-19 Lighthouse laboratory at the walk-in urgent care centre at Brants Bridge—one of two in the country. It is expected to process 40,000 tests a day at full capacity, from drive-in centres and home tests across the south-east. It is part of Britain's largest ever network of diagnostic testing facilities, and will create 300 new jobs for local people: 170 in logistics, 100 scientists, and 30 supervisors and managers. It should be open in January, running 24/7 and hoping to reach full capacity by February. It is a result of a collaboration between the Royal Berkshire Hospital, Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust, the Royal Surrey County Hospital, and Ashford and St Peter's Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust—a fantastic example of what can be achieved. I also thank the East Berkshire Clinical Commissioning Group.

The vaccine really gives us hope. It is being rolled out in Finchampstead in my constituency from tomorrow, with a capacity of more than 500 per day, and more broadly in Bracknell from next Monday. It is really exciting for the Bracknell constituency and beyond. Bracknell is pretty well served by hospitals. We have three hospitals on our doorstep, Wexham Park, Royal Berkshire and Frimley Park, all of which are serving my constituents brilliantly. I thank everyone working in the NHS and all key workers.

As I wrap up, I want to thank the people of Bracknell, Crowthorne, Finchampstead, Sandhurst and Wokingham Without for their pragmatism, social responsibility, patience and community spirit. We do not say thank you enough in this place. Without being glib, I am proud of what has been achieved locally, and I am grateful; merry Christmas to you all.

8.53 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am grateful to all hon. Members who have spoken in this debate. Taken together, the contributions have served as an important reminder of just how far the frontline of the fight against this pandemic stretches. I would highlight in particular the passionate speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who highlighted the plight of small businesses across her constituency, especially in the hospitality sector, and my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), who spoke about the urgent issue of vaccine distribution to nations in the global south.

We owe our deepest gratitude to all those who spend their days and nights caring for others, working to keep our local economies functioning, our communities safe and our public services working, including our NHS and care workers, who continue to work long, gruelling hours, struggling for months without adequate PPE in a heroic response to the virus. Time and time again, our teachers, support staff and childcare workers create safe and supportive environments for children to thrive, even under such huge pressures. Other key workers, including many on short-term or zero-hours contracts, work to keep the country running. Testing site workers and contact tracers, often under-trained and ill-equipped, have done a huge amount of work, as have so many others across the country during this difficult time.

I know that every Member across the House wants to support and recognise all those working on the frontline of coronavirus. It is essential that their commitment and sacrifice is met with a fair, effective and far more joined-up approach than what the Government are currently delivering. That is the minimum they deserve.

Labour pays tribute to the work carried out by doctors and scientists across the world to develop vaccines against covid-19. Every Member across the House will have shared in the jubilation as Margaret Keenan became the first person in the world to receive the Pfizer covid-19 jab following its clinical approval last week.

In the meantime, as the vaccination programme is rolled out, there is still a huge task to reduce transmission. Labour has warned for months of the need for an effective test, track and trace system, but unfortunately the Government failed to use the window provided by the second national lockdown to fix the Serco test and trace system, and it remains an area where they are failing.

Labour is clear that our local mayors and council leaders should be in the driving seat to deliver an effective localised test, track and trace system. Our local councils have been a lifeline for so many during this difficult time, and are crucial not only in facing the virus down, but in rebuilding and recovering from the pandemic, yet too often some parts of the UK are left behind by the Government. On too many occasions, local leaders have not been given a seat at the table while the national Serco test and trace system flounders. Local responses will vary according to the prevalence and transmission rate of the virus, but local leaders must know clearly what is expected of them and must be provided with the funding to deliver for the communities that they have been elected to serve.

The combination of Serco test and trace and the three-tier system failed to limit the spread of disease in September and October, and we ended up in a second

[Helen Hayes]

national lockdown. Nobody wants a repeat of that. That is why we are calling on the Government to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated, that systems are reformed and strengthened and that no area is left behind.

This afternoon, we learned that London and parts of Essex and Hertfordshire will be placed into tier 3 on Wednesday. That is devastating news for many businesses, driven by alarming rates of disease transmission. The measures are sadly necessary, but they will succeed only if the Government work constructively with local leaders and put in place the right measures to support businesses and those who need to self-isolate.

We have seen the Government's response too often being driven by who they know, not who is best placed to deliver. Multimillion-pound contracts have been handed to a small number of large firms, many of which are not integrated into our local communities and are not beholden to the same standards of scrutiny as Government Departments or local authorities. Not only that, but outsourced contracts and the cronyism too often associated with them have marred the Government's response. That must be addressed.

Today, we learned of yet another example: Fleetwood Strategy, a brand-new company whose founder worked on the Tories' election campaign, which was handed a £124,000 contract with no competition. We need much more transparency and more proof that experienced and qualified British businesses are being openly engaged. That is absolutely crucial for a joined-up and well-coordinated covid-19 response and for restoring the trust that is sorely lacking.

The Government must also see our schools, teachers and support staff as an indispensable part of our communities. Schools must be properly supported, with the right measures in place, including mass testing, to ensure that any spread of infection is swiftly contained. Local leaders in the north looked on in astonishment last week when councils in London and Essex were offered the mass testing for schools that they had been denied. The same councils in London and Essex were in turn bewildered at the lack of support provided for them to deliver the tests that they had been allocated. There are still schools struggling to access laptops for children who do not have them, so that they can learn from home when they need to self-isolate, at the same time as many children are being sent home due to infections in school or staff shortages. The Children's Commissioner, Ofsted and others have been clear that covid-19 has widened the disadvantage gap between children. The failure to ensure that every child has the basic equipment they need to be able to continue their education remotely when needed is a source of huge anger and frustration in many communities, and that, combined with the failure to roll out the catch-up tutoring programme in any meaningful way, means that the Government are allowing coronavirus to compound educational disadvantage.

Tackling covid-19 is a huge global challenge. Appallingly, the UK has the worst death rate in Europe and the deepest recession of any G7 country as a consequence, so the Government must now learn the lessons from other countries. The Government's response must be far more joined up. Countries that have managed the most effective

infection control introduced locally led contact tracing, deeply embedded in communities. Ensuring that people who need to self-isolate do so means putting in place income support so that no one has to choose between doing the right thing for public health and putting food on the table. However, we are still in a position where local authorities across England feel disconnected from central Government and where the national contact tracing system is still not anywhere near locally integrated enough to curb the spread of infection effectively.

All of us want the response to covid to be successful and all of us are unequivocally delighted at the news of our scientists' success in developing effective vaccines, but we still face very grave challenges. That is why Labour has proposed overhauling the failing support for self-isolation. The Government's own chief scientific adviser has said that testing "only matters if people isolate as well".

The Government must expand eligibility for the £500 test and trace support payment to users of the NHS covid-19 app and reduce the isolation period by using rapid testing. They must urgently conduct and publish an assessment of the financial barriers to self-isolation, including the level of statutory sick pay. They must end the top-down centralised model of test, trace and isolate once and for all, putting local teams in charge, and they must ensure routine testing for all high-risk workplaces and high-transmission areas. For our national response to work, a more connected and community-based response is crucial. I urge the Government to listen today and meet that challenge head-on.

We can all look forward to the vaccination roll-out. It is vital that everyone who is offered a vaccine takes it and protects themselves and those closest to them, but we also know that the roll-out of the approved vaccines will take months, and that still, every single day, hundreds of people across the UK are dying from covid, and many more are suffering from its longer-term effects. We cannot and must not continue on the same path, with the Government clinging to outsourced contracts that have failed time and again to deliver. The Government must fix Track and Trace, support people to do the right thing, help vital sectors of our economy such as hospitality and the performing arts to survive beyond the pandemic, and work with our councils and communities to break the stranglehold of this virus and enable the recovery to begin.

9.3 pm

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): The speeches we have heard this evening remind us just what hard times we live in, when we have had to do things that would have been unimaginable just a year ago. There are the things we have done to save lives, but sadly, even so, many lives have been lost. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out in his statement to this House earlier today and the Minister for prevention, public health and primary care, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), reminded us in her opening remarks, this is not over yet.

I know that people in the places moving into tier 3 on Wednesday morning will feel a real sense of disappointment, especially as we get closer to Christmas. We have heard today some powerful contributions from across this House about how our constituents have been affected.

For instance, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) spoke about the impact of the restrictions on mental health, with the loss of routine, loss of social contact and loss of opportunities to pursue passions and activities that make life worth living—ice skating, as we have heard, but also dance classes. I should add to that the loss of livelihoods. Many colleagues have spoken about the impact on hospitality, and particularly pubs. Believe me, I really appreciate that, with a brewery as the largest employer in my constituency.

I also welcome the recognition and the tributes paid by hon. Members not only to the NHS and its workforce, but to care homes and care workers, who have indeed been there for the people they care for day in, day out throughout this pandemic. They are rightly prioritised for testing. I will pick up on a comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) and say that care agency staff absolutely should be tested regularly, using tests distributed to the care homes that they work at.

Jacob Young: The care agency that I referred to said that it has about 160 members of staff on its books, of whom 80 are in work regularly. Of those 80, 60 are included in testing in some care homes; it is that final 20 who are not getting regular tests. I was told that the same was true for other agency workers, too.

Helen Whately: It will probably be helpful if we pursue the specific case outside the Chamber. I just wanted to reiterate the importance of care agency staff being tested in care homes. Tests are being distributed to care homes for that purpose.

Whenever the Government have to take difficult decisions, such as the ones we have taken today, the impact of those decisions on people across the country is always at the front of our mind. With a 14% rise in average daily cases last week and a 13% rise in daily hospital admissions, we had no option but to act today, even ahead of the formal review point on Wednesday. As the Secretary of State reminded us earlier, Germany had to introduce tougher restrictions over the weekend, and Sweden is seeing real pressures on intensive care beds. As we set out in our winter plan, our strategy has always been to suppress the virus and prevent our NHS from becoming overwhelmed until the vaccine can make us safe.

I know that hon. Members will share my sense of optimism that, just as many other parts of the country have done so magnificently, the areas now facing rising rates can turn this around. They are getting the support they need to do that, right where it is needed most, including through the provision of community testing, with millions of newly invented tests targeted at the areas that need that support. I know that the Members representing those areas will want to play their part in this effort, so I can say that today we published a guide for Members so that colleagues can promote, support and champion local community testing and contact tracing in their areas.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), who spoke about how he had seen people become more careful in his area as they saw rates rise locally. He saw their behaviour change through the increased wearing of face masks, for instance, as people took the extra steps to keep

themselves and others safe. That is a reminder that ultimately, all our efforts must be underpinned by a sense of personal responsibility. Our national effort begins with every one of us.

We all know what a difficult year it has been, yet that does not make those important public health messages any less true. As several hon. Members have reminded us this evening, we must continue to wash our hands, cover our face and make space. We must continue to self-isolate when we are asked to, for the 10 days now required. Perhaps even more challenging than that, though, we must be unafraid to ask ourselves difficult questions about who we are meeting, their vulnerability and whether that is a risk worth taking. Time and again, the common sense of the British people has prevailed, and it must continue to do so.

Finally, our vaccine deployment continues apace, because we know that vaccines represent our best route out of these difficult times. It is such a relief to be able to say about vaccination not if, but when. Tens of thousands of people have already been vaccinated, and GP roll-out started today in hundreds of parts of the country, so many more will be vaccinated this week, like the relatives my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and for South Thanet mentioned.

Emma Hardy: The Minister will be aware that one of the issues raised during her call with the areas going into tier 3 was the need for boots on the ground—for people to help to administer the vaccine. The health force in Hull and areas like it is diminished because many are self-isolating, others are suffering from covid and it is an exhausted workforce. Will additional personnel resources be made available to help deliver the vaccine?

Helen Whately: I know that a huge amount of work is going on to ensure that we have the boots on the ground needed to vaccinate people. Indeed, that is one of the things that those who have volunteered—particularly those with healthcare experience who are returning to the NHS—are stepping forward to help with.

We will vaccinate in care homes by Christmas, and that process has already begun in Scotland. Most of us who are eligible can expect to receive our vaccine in the next few months, which is truly heartening, but we must all stay on our guard through Christmas and into the new year. This is not the time to ease up—quite the opposite, in fact, because this is the busiest time of year for our NHS and for the doctors, nurses and other health and social care workers who have already done so much for us in this pandemic. Along with many colleagues today, I thank our health and social care workers.

This is a moment to stand firm against this deadly virus and to redouble our efforts to keep one another safe. This is one of the toughest things we have ever had to do as a country and one of the toughest things that anyone has had to endure personally, but the end is in sight. We must steel ourselves and do the right thing, if not for our own sake then for others', and we will get through this together.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered covid-19.

Business without Debate

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 3 to 10 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION)

That the draft Waste and Environmental Permitting etc. (Legislative Functions and Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 20 October, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (SEA FISHERIES)

That the draft Common Fisheries Policy (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) (No. 2) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 22 October, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION)

That the draft Chemicals (Health and Safety) and Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 15 October, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CIVIL AVIATION)

That the draft Unmanned Aircraft (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 3 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (WILDLIFE)

That the draft Animal Welfare and Invasive Non-native Species (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 21 October, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CUSTOMS)

That the draft Customs Safety and Security Procedures (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 26 November, be approved.

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

That the draft Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) (Amendment) (Coronavirus) (No. 2) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 23 November, be approved.

PUBLIC HEALTH

That the draft Health Protection (Coronavirus, Testing Requirements and Standards) (England) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 25 November, be approved.—(*David Rutley*.)

Question agreed to.

Dark Skies

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*David Rutley*.)

9.12 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is good to see Members from across the country here this evening, representing their own dark sky places and reserves. It is an immense privilege to represent in this House Arundel and South Downs, with its rivers, castles, downlands, woods, vineyards and, yes, its dark skies at night. Much of the constituency lies within the South Downs national park, which, among its many virtues, shares something with only a handful of places on earth: since 2016, it has officially been an international dark sky reserve, as recognised by the International Dark-Sky Association. On a clear night, the Milky Way can clearly be seen from locations such as Bignor hill, which is one of the darkest spots in the park. For literally millions of people in the overdeveloped south-east, this is their last window out to the galaxy, as the cataracts of light pollution gradually obscures their vision.

I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group for dark skies with my noble Friend Lord Rees of Ludlow, the Astronomer Royal. A contemporary of Stephen Hawking at Cambridge, he has spent over 50 years contributing to our understanding of the cosmos, but what if Lord Rees had never been inspired to pursue this career path? Would he ever have dreamed of contributing to our understanding of the universe had an orange skyglow in rural Shropshire obscured his vision as he looked upward to the sky? Together, he and I founded the group in the hope that future generations may still be able to see the stars and the Milky Way—features that generations of our ancestors have looked up to—which is already impossible in many parts of the country. It is an experience that gives a unique sense of perspective about our place in the universe.

Sadly, light pollution is growing exponentially in its geographic coverage and population reach. CPRE's recent annual star count found that 61% of UK citizens live in areas with severe light pollution, meaning that they could count fewer than 10 stars in the Orion constellation. That was a 4% increase in light pollution on the previous year. The case for controlling light pollution is not just for the benefit of astronomers, just as it is not only ornithologists who would miss songbirds if they disappeared from our gardens. It also has health, educational, environmental and economic benefits.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing the debate forward. He might not be aware that I represent a mixed rural and urban constituency. I am very blessed to live in the countryside, with fresh air in every breath, wildlife aplenty and lovely dark nights to sleep through. I am very supportive of his drive to ensure that the Government take this issue seriously. Does he agree that the mental health benefits of a good night's sleep are well documented, and that dark skies can therefore play a very beneficial role?

Andrew Griffith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his wise intervention. Indeed, mental health, like so many aspects of health, is affected by sleep deprivation caused by light exposure at the wrong time.

In 2018, *Nature* magazine reported that “light at night is exerting pervasive, long-term stress on ecosystems, from coasts to farmland to urban waterways, many of which are already suffering from other, more well-known forms of pollution.” It stated that a UK study sequentially over 13 years found that “artificial lighting was linked with trees bursting their buds more than a week earlier—a magnitude similar to that predicted for 2 °C of global warming.” Light pollution is a huge waste of energy too. Lighting accounts for 5% of global carbon emissions—that is more than aviation and shipping combined. Within that category, street lighting is the single biggest contributor.

Finally, our dark skies are increasingly an economic activity on which many livelihoods depend. Like many of our national parks, the South Downs runs an annual festival attracting thousands of visitors, led by the excellent dark skies officer, Dan Oakley, who helped me research for today’s debate. Dark skies tourism is one of the fastest growing parts of the outdoor tourism sector, with memorable opportunities to sleep and dine under the stars offered by businesses such as Woodfire Camping in Graffham in my constituency.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He mentions tourism, which is of course a big part of the Brecon Beacons. We are very proud to be the only dark sky reserve in Wales and the fifth international dark sky reserve in the world. I think he is going to come on to some of the recommendations made in a report by the all-party parliamentary group for dark skies. Does he agree that the Welsh Government and other devolved Administrations need to work well with the UK Government to ensure that there is a cross-UK approach?

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for her constituency and its virtues. I am encouraged to hear that they include dark skies. I agree with her that it is imperative that the devolved Administrations, which are responsible for so many facets of life for our citizens and constituents, fully embrace the report’s recommendations. It is a very inclusive report, as I shall go on to say.

This is a growing area of economic returns.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): On that point, my hon. Friend has extolled the wonderful virtues of Arundel and the South Downs, but Lowestoft has a unique selling point: it is the most easterly point in the UK and the place where the sun rises first. We are trying to make a tourism attraction of this, with the first light festival. Does he agree that unnatural light takes away that special appeal and special offer that we have in Lowestoft?

Andrew Griffith: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. Although he did not invite me, I would be very willing to come and see the charms of first light, as it rises in the east off Lowestoft.

For health, for nature, for the environment and for the economy, there are excellent reasons to protect a dark sky at night. I think all of us in this House can agree on that. If the problem is so clear, what is to be done? Well, the good news is that it really is as simple as flicking off a switch. Unlike acid rain, lead pollution or even carbon emissions, there is no long and complex supply chain or difficult trade-offs to be made. The even

better news for the Minister is that the all-party group for dark skies has already done the hard work and brought it together in a simple 10-point plan that I believe he has already seen. We do not even have to go first as a country. There are several models around the world of countries that have legislated for the improved protection of dark skies, such as South Korea and, although I hesitate to say it just at this moment in time, France. Our 10-point plan was produced following a consultation in which over 170 academics, legal professionals, national park associations, astronomers, lighting professionals, engineers and businesses participated.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman not only for his generosity in giving way but for his success in bringing this debate, which is massively important, to the Floor of the House. He is the Member of Parliament for Britain’s newest national park, whereas I speak as one who represents two rather old ones: the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales. I am sure he would agree with me that part of the attraction of places like ours is not just the landscape itself, but the landscape that is silhouetted by the canopy of stars above. In his report and recommendation to Government, will he call on them to toughen up planning powers, in national parks and in other planning authorities as well, to prevent developers encroaching on our areas and adding to light pollution, which removes the appeal and the beauty that we both share in our beautiful parts of the world?

Andrew Griffith: The hon. Member makes an excellent point and anticipates one of the points I hope to get on to.

The first of our recommendations concerns the Minister himself. As has been widely reported, we would like to see a designated Minister for the dark skies with cross-cutting responsibility for this issue. Last week, I and others met the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). As a DEFRA Minister, she told us about the contributions her Department has made towards assessing the impact of artificial light on wider biodiversity. She also shared with us a fascinating story of her visit to Skomer a few years ago to witness the Manx shearwaters flying at night to find their chicks, making her aware of just how sensitive such creatures are to light pollution, which impacts their flight paths. However, so many of the issues involved lie with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that if we had to pick one Department, and I believe we do, it is there that we think the designated Minister should sit.

Secondly, the language in the national planning policy framework on avoiding light pollution should be significantly expanded, allowing local planning authorities to impose specific planning conditions related to external lighting, including curfew hours, standards for brightness, colour temperature, as well as the direction and the density of lighting. The most recent NPPF from 2019 makes very little reference to lighting, with paragraph 180(c) being the only reference, which states:

“limit the impact of light pollution from artificial light on local amenity, intrinsically dark landscapes and nature conservation.”

Although a number of local authorities have adopted policies that seek to do that, in practice most development proposals are simply not assessed against such policies.

[Andrew Griffith]

CPRE's "Shedding Light" survey found that almost two-thirds of local authorities do not have a lighting policy in their local plan and only a third had proactively adopted one to comply with the NPPF.

This need not be the case. The South Downs national park contains approximately 2,800 local authority streetlights, all of which point downwards and minimise the colour temperature. National planning policy on light pollution should require all proposed developments to conduct a dark sky impact assessment and ensure there is no net impact of a scheme on a dark sky location. Much of this could be overseen and enforced by a new statutory commission for the dark skies to develop standards and regulations, and work with local authorities to enforce them. We should also create a national programme of best practice, dark sky hours, in which categories of lighting can be dimmed or turned off completely in consultation with the community, lighting professionals and the police.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): My hon. Friend and I share much the same views on dark skies: I am a huge fan. While we need to be careful of safety at night, people walking, pavements and safe passage home, does my good friend agree that turning out the lights could save councils an absolute fortune in money and cost?

Andrew Griffith: As ever, my hon. Friend, with his varied experience that he brings to the House, makes an excellent point. Not only can hard-pressed local councils save money that they can redirect to supporting their residents elsewhere, but there is also, surprisingly, no evidence at all that street lighting contributes to greater safety and it has impacts on the environment, as well as some of the other impacts that we talk about. He makes a very good point.

Before we leave the planning process, we cannot ignore the elephant—or perhaps I should say the Ursa Major—in the room: over-development in the south-east. I pick up a point that the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) has already made. I have spoken on these matters many times in this House in my short year here, and I make no apology for doing so again tonight. Right now, my constituents face a veritable clone army of developments, with proposals in Adversane, Barnham, Ford, Kirdford, West Grinstead, Mayfield and every compass point in between.

Consideration of light pollution in the planning system can only be palliative relief while the Minister's Department consults on taking an algorithm that already lists heavily towards the overcrowded south-east and tilting it still further, rather than levelling up. We are building the wrong types of dwellings in the wrong place. Before the second world war, roughly a fifth of the population lived in the south of England outside London, while twice as many lived in the north and Scotland taken together. Now, equal numbers live in both. We should be building far more in our great urban centres of London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool and many others—building environmentally friendly supertalls that reach up to the stars, instead of concreting over our last remaining natural places. We should be pursuing commercial to residential conversion on a galactic scale in places where the infrastructure already exists.

Where rural areas such as West Sussex have their own housing needs to fulfil, that should be through a brownfield-first policy, utilising brownfield land registers that are able nationally to accommodate more than 1 million potential homes. How can we teach our children to recycle plastic bags from a supermarket to save the environment, and yet bulldoze by numbers through the ancient fields, hedgerows and woodlands of West Sussex?

Elsewhere, I am proud that this Government are the greenest in our country's history. We have one of the most ambitious plans for our environment of any leading nation. At the climate ambition summit this weekend, the Prime Minister confirmed that the UK will cut its emissions by 68% by 2030 versus 1990 levels, while our neighbours and friends in the European Union could only manage 55%. I contend that is because conservation has always been at the very heart of conservatism. Our manifesto last December pledged to protect and restore our natural environment by setting up a new independent office for environmental protection. Perhaps protecting our dark skies could be an early and easy win for that organisation.

Finally, we need to give local authorities a more effective method of acting on light nuisance. The current Environmental Protection Act 1990 requires light nuisance be prejudicial to health, which sets an incredibly high threshold for action, and the provision is only focused on the impact of light emission on humans, rather than the environment. It is subjective and difficult to prove. Further to that, relevant sections should be added to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to prohibit accidental or deliberate disturbance by inappropriate artificial light.

I want to conclude and allow my right hon. Friend the Minister to respond, but first I thank all those who have made this document possible. They are too numerous to mention, but one whose involvement was quite singular was my researcher, and secretary of the all-party group, Chris Cook.

Next week on the winter solstice, the two largest planets in our solar system, Jupiter and Saturn, will align in the night sky to appear to form a single superstar. This rare event is called a conjunction, and it will be the closest to earth since 1623 and the most observable since 1226, a time when English kings still ruled most of western France. If the night is clear, I shall be lucky enough to observe it from the South Downs. I am told that this particular combination will not be seen again until the spring of the year 2080, which is a humbling reminder of our small place and transient tenure in the universe. I would like to think that we might witness a similar conjunction down here, with a Government who are serious about tackling the damage we are doing to our environment, a White Paper leading to a new national planning policy framework and a growing recognition of the importance of protecting the dark sky.

9.30 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) on securing this debate and on making such eloquent and passionate arguments, as he ever does, in support of dark skies. I am also impressed by his ability to weave into his speech historical references such as "The Lion in Winter",

about King Henry II and his powerful reign. I suspect that although we might see dark skies again, we shall never see the like of Henry II again. I congratulate Chris Cook, my hon. Friend's researcher, on all the efforts that he has undertaken on my hon. Friend's behalf.

I am also grateful to the other hon. and right hon. Members who have taken the time and, so to speak, seen the light in coming to this debate to speak on behalf of their constituents, and to the all-party group for the important work it is doing to preserve our dark skies. We share a common goal in wanting to limit the effect of light pollution from artificial light on our dark landscape. I therefore welcome the initiative taken by my hon. Friend and his noble Friend Lord Rees, the Astronomer Royal, in working to reconnect people with the wonder of the dark skies, as well as with a wide range of other benefits to society and the environment that flow from his endeavours.

Of course, when used wisely, artificial light can extend opportunities for sport and recreation, and it can enhance security and safety in and around our homes and on our roads. However, as Members have rightly pointed out, when it is used unwisely, artificial light can be a real nuisance, becoming pollution that undermines our enjoyment of the countryside and especially of our night skies. My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs has rightly pointed out that we cannot overlook how much energy is wasted by unnecessary lighting, as we work together on achieving our climate change net zero goals. That point was also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), and I hope that the highways authorities around our country will take note.

I am aware of the effect that poorly located artificial light can have, not just on residents but on wildlife, not least in its capacity to interrupt their nocturnal habits. Any of us who has tried to get a good night's sleep with a bright street light shining through their bedroom window will understand what I am talking about. In fact, if I may deviate slightly, one of my proudest achievements in my 10 years as the Member of Parliament for Tamworth is not having tried to fix the NHS or improve the schools or the road system of my town; it has been to get a street lamp moved so that a little old lady living next to the Belgrave Lakes could get a decent night's sleep. She knows what I am talking about, and I think that we in this House also know what I am talking about. The same applies to ecosystems and protected species. There is increasing evidence that lighting can also have far-reaching effects on biodiversity and nature. The Government recognise these issues and are taking action.

I know that my hon. Friend appreciates, as we all do, that there are complexities surrounding the policy and legislation that govern artificial light. Responsibility for its monitoring and regulation crosses several Departments and also falls to local authorities. Our intention has been to utilise the planning system to get the lighting right from the outset. Local planning authorities can require applicants to submit a lighting strategy with their planning application, and they can consider on a case-by-case basis what conditions are appropriate.

I have no doubt that my hon. Friend's all-party group will make an important and valuable contribution to the current work on our planning reforms, and I am grateful to the group for so ably and clearly setting out its 10 dark sky policies for Government. I believe that

planning control can and should be a key determinant in this, with support from organisations such as the all-party group. That is why we have taken action to ensure that light pollution is addressed through the planning system.

Tim Farron: The Minister is making a good case, and it is important that we hear what the Government intend to do when it comes to working with the planning guidance. Does he agree that planning authorities—particularly cash-strapped national parks—will always worry about the potential of losing an appeal, at great cost to them and the local community, and that they will need real confidence and support from the Government to allow them to say a flat no to developers who seek to bring about developments that threaten our dark skies?

Christopher Pincher: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He will know that five of our parks have committed to conserving dark skies. We said in the "Planning for the future" White Paper that we would undertake a comprehensive review of the skills and resources that local planning authorities require to do the work. The consideration of the White Paper is under way, as he will know, and I will say a little more about that in a moment. I am sure such considerations will be given very careful thought as we work through the review process.

The national planning policy framework, which was updated last year and now includes the paragraph to which my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs referred, makes it clear that planning policies and decisions should limit the effect of light pollution on local amenity, dark landscapes and nature conservation, including where there may be effects on wildlife and ecosystems. It is supported by guidance; it emphasises the importance of getting the right light in the right place at the right time; and it helps local planners and developers to design in ways of avoiding glare and intrusion.

My department has worked closely with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), to revise and reinforce the planning practice guidance on light pollution that we published last year. That guidance encourages local planning authorities to engage with all relevant bodies and interested parties, whether statutory or not, who may feel that they are affected by a particular development proposal. It should not just be a case of rounding up the usual suspects, so to speak.

Our guidance emphasises the importance of getting it right from the outset, because lighting schemes can be costly and difficult to change. Fitting things is expensive, but retrofitting them is even more expensive. That approach will help to ensure that lighting design is carefully considered at the outset, to avoid harsh glare and obtrusive effects and to help to safeguard our environment. Our policy remains that organisations that wish to be more engaged in the planning process should liaise directly with local planning authorities on the types of planning application on which they want to comment.

Conversely, we encourage local planning authorities to produce and publish locally specific lists of non-statutory consultees, thereby helping applicants to refine their proposals in a way that can balance the needs of the

[Christopher Pincher]

built environment with wider considerations. I suspect that there will be a role for Members of Parliament, including members of the APPG, in that regard. It is important to remember that being a statutory consultee does not give any organisation a right of veto over a planning proposal or decision. This ultimately rests with the local planning authority as the decision maker in the first instance. As we move to our new upfront planning system that places much greater emphasis on holistic and strategic design, I suspect that there will be opportunities for such stakeholders to have and to play an important role.

One of the key proposals in our “Planning for the future” White Paper is bringing forward a quicker and simpler framework for assessing environmental effects—one that does not compromise environmental standards and, indeed, encourages opportunities for environmental enhancements to be identified and pursued early in the development process. We have received a significant number of responses in consulting on our proposals, and we will respond in due course once we have processed them all. We have had over 44,000 consultation responses, so I am sure that the House, and particularly the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs, will understand if it takes us a little time to get through them all.

I should briefly describe some of the other approaches being taken to tackle light pollution, given its potential significant effect not just on rural areas but on our towns and cities too. Street lighting is an important issue and it needs to be considered carefully when balancing the competing priorities of maintaining road safety and avoiding light pollution. The Department for Transport is therefore encouraging all local authorities to replace their street lighting, wherever feasible, with more modern technology such as LED lighting units, as such alternatives can greatly reduce the amount of glare emitted. I am aware that action is being taken by Highways England on replacing poorly performing lighting—I have seen quite a lot of that as I drive up and down the M40—and that these initiatives are supported

by those with interest in preserving our dark skies, such as the CPRE and the British Astronomical Society.

We also recognise that wildlife species can have heightened sensitivity to light, being affected by even very low levels in a number of different ways. This is especially important where habitats support nocturnal animals, insects and protected species such as bats. My colleagues at DEFRA have recently published and contributed to assessments of the effect of artificial light on insects, and wider biodiversity work, to ensure that the Government continue to address the key drivers of biodiversity loss. Indeed, an objective of the Environment Bill, which is before the House, is a biodiversity net gain.

I am all too aware that common causes of complaints to local authorities include domestic shop or office exterior security lights, illuminated advertising and floodlighting, so these installations may require particular attention. Similarly, insensitively positioned decorative lighting, particularly in rural areas, can be a cause for concern. It is therefore essential that such situations are prevented from occurring right from the outset, as pursuing remedies through the statutory nuisance regime or other legal avenues can add further stress to individuals and incur heavy costs. Planning committees should look closely at that when considering the strategic design of their town centres and their built environment.

On behalf of the Government, I should like to add my congratulations to those received by both the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors on being named international dark sky reserves just last week.

In conclusion, I again thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs on all his work and diligence in this area, and I also congratulate fellow Members across the House on speaking with such passion and on the strong arguments that they advanced in support of this new all-party group’s objectives. I look forward to working with the group and with Members of all stripes, from all parts of the House, on this important issue as we advance planning proposals.

Question put and agreed to.

9.45 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 14 December 2020

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

Financial Reward for Government Workers and Key Workers

4.30 pm

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I remind right hon. and hon. Members that there have been some changes to the procedure in Westminster Hall, and that even if Members have attended a Westminster Hall debate before under the new rules, there have been changes to the changed rules. In order to respect social distancing, I ask Members to sit at the seats with ticks against them. There are more people on the call list than seats on the horseshoe, so I will call Members to speak only if they were here at the start of the debate. If Members who have spoken wish to leave, or move to the seats at the back, they can; that is the only way to ensure that other Members can speak, because Members are not allowed to speak from the Public Gallery.

I also ask Members to respect the one-way system by coming in through the one door, and going out through the other, and to sanitise the microphones that are in front of them.

4.31 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 306845 and 328754, relating to financial rewards for government workers and keyworkers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer, and an honour to lead for the Petitions Committee on this debate.

As we come to the end of any year, we all start to reflect on the events of the past 12 months, but 2020 has been such an unprecedented year for everyone. Throughout the year, the extraordinary contributions made by so many, particularly our key workers, have made our lives so much better throughout the pandemic. I put on record again my sincere thanks to all those who have worked hard and have given what was most needed, when we needed it most. Those people have been invaluable. However, it seems that despite warm words, the Government do not appreciate the work that so many have done for us. We clapped for them on our doorsteps, but it turns out that they are not worth paying properly in recognition of their dedication. As we can see from the number of signatures on these two petitions, and indeed the sheer number of petitions on this issue, there is strong feeling across the country on how we should reward people on the frontline.

During the summer, I had a phone call from my friend Mel's brother, a local refuse collector and union rep. He wanted to tell me at first hand that his team had turned up throughout the pandemic, and continued to not miss a round. I am so proud of them, and so proud of the efforts that people have made to keep our country going. Swansea Council and local authorities across the United Kingdom can be very proud of their workforce and how they have adapted to the challenges they have faced.

Although Rob Stewart, the leader of Swansea Council, is looking at different ways to reward staff, his hands are tied financially.

Former colleagues of mine in the teaching profession, in both England and Wales, who have kept schools open for key workers' children, described to me their immense fatigue, and the pressure they are under. They are moving classrooms, carrying resources, and increasing their planning and preparation, in a job in which they feel deeply responsible for the learning and progression of our future generations. They are also on their knees. When the Welsh Labour Government tried to reward workers in care homes with a £500 bonus earlier in the year, the Chancellor of the Exchequer taxed them on it, with those claiming universal credit suffering a double whammy. These are the poorest paid people in the public sector, and they took those hits again and again—and it looks like the same will happen if the Scottish Government try to give a thank-you payment to their NHS staff.

In response to my friend the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who I am pleased to see in this debate, the Prime Minister said that he was

“lost in admiration for the efforts of our civil servants, whether in DWP, HMRC or the Treasury. If we think about the furloughing scheme, everybody said it was impossible and far too complicated, and that we would never get that cash into people’s pockets, but they did it within four weeks. That is a fantastic tribute to the work of our civil service, and I thank them from the bottom of my heart.”—[*Official Report*, 11 May 2020; Vol. 676, c. 38.]

Following the Chancellor's spending review announcement that there will be a pay freeze for all public sector workers, I suspect that civil servants will not be feeling the Prime Minister's “admiration” so much as the “lost” bit. This further pay freeze comes after public sector workers have already been punished by a decade of pay freezes and increased workload. I know; I was one of them.

I am sure that we will hear from the Minister about the difference between public and private sector pay, but we know that once workforce characteristics such as experience and educational attainment are taken into account, there is close to 0% difference in pay. Undoubtedly, we will hear about the need for fairness for those working in the private sector, and I wholeheartedly agree that they should be treated with fairness, but this is not, and should not be, a race to the bottom. We should be bringing pay in the private sector up to a standard that makes all “work pay”, as the Conservatives are wont to say.

The Minister will probably talk about value for money for taxpayers, but guess what? Public sector workers pay their taxes, too. If the Government do not think that the work that has been done by civil servants—nurses, the police, the fire service, work coaches, Border Force, refuse collectors, workers in the justice system, our armed forces, teachers and, indeed, all those who have faced the biggest challenge and have put themselves on the frontline in fighting this pandemic—is worthy of a pay rise, they should say so. And I will wait for the Government line to be trotted out about the poorest paid being rewarded. If they were being rewarded in any meaningful way, I would welcome that announcement, but as with all these things, the devil is in the detail. A pay rise of £250 for those earning under £24,000 a year is equivalent to just £4.80 a week, and that is before tax, so in terms of take-home pay, it is about enough for some mince pies, 2 pints of milk and some teabags—what a Christmas bonus for them!

[*Tonia Antoniazzi*]

Just one look at the civil service campaign “Here For You” shows what a resilient and adaptive workforce we have in our civil servants, including the defence equipment workers who have been overseeing the staffing of the Nightingale hospitals; the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, which has worked to get other key workers their driving test quickly; and those in the Foreign Office who repatriated thousands of British citizens from abroad. We cannot forget this. I personally thank them all, especially the workers in Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs who got the furlough scheme up and running, and the Department for Work and Pensions staff—friends of mine—who processed thousands of universal credit claims. Some of them are already on low wages.

Public sector workers are not asking a lot; they just want their contribution to be recognised. They were undoubtedly grateful for our applause earlier this year, but that will not put food on the table, buy new school uniforms, keep the car on the road or enable them to get to work on public transport. Claps do not pay the bills. At the end of the day, we are here to represent them, and just from looking round Westminster Hall today, people can see who really cares about this.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I intend to start calling the Front-Bench spokespeople in approximately 40 minutes. I think I have 11 speakers, so I will start with a time limit of four minutes. If some people speak for less, that should just about do it, but if there are many interventions, I will have to reduce the time. I call John McDonnell.

4.40 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (*Tonia Antoniazzi*), who eloquently introduced the debate, and covered most of the ground that most of us want to emphasise.

I want the Minister to realise that getting petitions on this scale reflects a depth of anger among those most affected—civil servants, of course—as well as their families and the whole community. That depth of anger is felt because these are the people who kept this country going for the last nine months. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gower said, the Department for Work and Pensions, which is round the corner from me, administered a million more universal credit claims. The Ealing HMRC office, just down the way from my constituency, which the Government are closing, administered all the claims to keep businesses going—the furloughs—so that companies were not bankrupted. Also, there is Heathrow. This morning, I was on the picket lines. Two immigration and border control staff died as a result of covid. Those are the sacrifices that these people have made, so no wonder there is that depth of anger.

That depth of anger is being felt because this comes after 10 years of pay freezes and pay cuts—six years of a 1% pay increase, then pay freezes on top of that. We have an epidemic of in-work poverty, affecting 4 million people. Some 70% of kids in poverty are in families where someone is in work. We are now talking about destitution in our country.

I give this warning to the Government: there is another pandemic coming—a pandemic of debt. Some 18 million people have incurred debts as a result of the pandemic in the last nine months. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that we have never seen this scale of debt before. StepChange has said that nearly 600,000 renters are borrowing to keep a roof over their heads. I was startled to learn that 100,000 people attempt suicide associated with debt every year. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation said that 60% of those on universal credit have gone for a loan in the last few months. Why? To keep a roof over their head, and to put food on their children’s plates.

I am fearful of what will hit us next. I, too, do not want to hear claptrap from Ministers about comparisons with private pay. The Library demolished that argument. I find it ironic that the Government privatised public services, and are now complaining about low pay in the private sector. There is a bizarre irony in the argument that Ministers use.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (*Peter Dowd*), who was the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, is here with me. The economic illiteracy of this has not escaped us. It is almost as though John Maynard Keynes was never born. What we should not do in a situation like this is cut wages; that would cut demand in the economy. The argument will be that the Government are borrowing a lot. Of course we should borrow in this situation, to ensure that we pay wages to people on low pay, who spend their wages, which increases demand and ensures that we get out of the downturn as rapidly as possible.

My advice to the Minister is straightforward: the Government need to get back round the table with the unions and start negotiating a decent pay rise. Take a lesson from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who admitted before a Select Committee that having 200 bargaining units in the civil service was wasteful. Get back to one table, and one negotiation on fair pay for those who have given so much in the last nine months, just to keep this country’s head above water.

4.44 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. It seems that we are in a loop with the Government, as far as public sector pay is concerned. In 2008, the Government made another attempt to curtail public sector pay. Three trade unions—the Public and Commercial Services Union, Prospect and the FDA—expressed their dismay at the approach taken by the Government. At the time we said:

“It is high time the Chancellor recognised the human cost of his disastrous pay cap and commit to giving our dedicated civil servants the pay rise they deserve.”

We all remember that the coalition blamed the last Labour Government for not being prepared for the world financial crisis—“Labour’s banking crisis”, as they called it. They said that they had to get the public finances into shape, and public sector workers were the first on the list. They underwent a decade of pay restraint. Members will remember the silly comparison to fixing the roof while the sun shines. Well, the roof has well and truly fallen in—and public sector workers will have to pay for it to be fixed, according to the Government.

Here we are, in the worst crisis the country has faced, which took place on this Government's watch. They were simply unprepared. Despite the hard work of the public sector, which my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) referred to—it is made up of 5.3 million people, and the public sector pay bill is £190 billion—the Government have decided to pick on them yet again. Every 1% pay rise costs around £1.9 billion gross; after tax and national insurance, is about £1 billion.

Yet again we have an easy target and the same old strategy: set the public sector against the private sector, and set parts of the public sector against other parts of the public sector. It is such a cynical approach. Here is an idea: there are 1,200 tax reliefs, through which we forgo £400 billion, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Have the Government bothered to look at any of them in detail, so that perhaps they can give the public sector the break that it deserves after 10 years of restraint? No. Very little work is being done. They cannot be bothered, because the public sector workers will pick up the bill for the Government's incompetence.

Let us look at a few examples of how the Government could be a tad more imaginative. Capital gains tax relief for entrepreneurs' qualifying disposals is £2.7 billion, although it is coming down. Tonnage tax is £100 million—my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) often refers to that. The patent box is £1.2 billion, and research and development relief is £2.2 billion. There are £300 million-worth of fiddles in that. I will stop there, because it gets a little tedious. I have a very long list. The Government talk about incentivising people; they incentivise their mates all right. The Minister will tell us that there have not been any public sector disputes or pay problems. These people need a pay rise.

I rarely bring personal matters to this House, but I will make an exception today. My daughter Jennie would have been 32 years old today. She died in a cycling accident 10 weeks ago. She worked at the Royal Liverpool University Hospital—yes, in the NHS; in the public sector, as does my wife, her mother, and her friends, and as did I. She and her colleagues worked hard. They do work hard. I owe it to all those who work in the public sector to speak out for them today. Without question, they deserve a decent pay rise, full stop. In the light of the covid crisis, it is time for some of those on the tax relief bonus, as it is being called, to take their turn.

4.47 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Mr Stringer. I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for securing this important debate.

Before entering Parliament, I spent nearly my entire working life in the public sector. I can assure hon. Members and friends that during my 30-year local government career, morale was never worse than during the past decade. The austerity programme initiated by the coalition Government, coupled with pay restraint amounting to substantial cuts in real-terms pay, brought unsustainable stress to public sector workers and the services that they provide. Average public sector pay is still £900 lower today in real terms than it was in 2010. It was hardly a period of shining progress in the run-up to the biggest public health crisis in our country's

modern history. At the core of that unsustainability was the fact that the public sector was never required to deliver less—quite the opposite. The drive for efficiency, alongside the demand to deliver more with less, severely hamstrung the capacity of the public sector to deliver the changes that were promised. Although my direct experience was in local government, the same is true right across the public sector.

We cannot simply disregard the previous 10 years as though they never happened. They are the historical context for debates such as this one, as we look to the future. Right hon. and hon. Members will know that more than half of all key workers are public sector workers. The race to the bottom has seen Brand Rishi divide up the public sector; apparently, not all are born equal: some are awarded meagre pay increases, while the vast majority are not. There is even new language used; “pause” instead of “freeze” is one example. The public sector is under no illusions. The photo ops on the steps of No. 11 every Thursday evening were exactly that—photo opportunities, and nothing more.

During the summer, the Government went into a spin overdrive, announcing above-inflation pay rises for some of those public sector workers whose rate of pay is recommended by pay review bodies. The Government enacted those recommendations while leaving out those whose pay is not set by pay review bodies, namely local government workers, social care staff and thousands of junior civil servants. Whether workers received a pay uplift a few months ago or not, the entire public sector is now set to be hit again for at least the next 12 months, leaving millions of key workers, who continue to go above and beyond in our hour of greatest need, facing another lost decade. Enough, quite simply, is enough.

I could give many examples, but I will conclude by pointing out that the problems created by more than a decade of pay restraint in the civil service have been compounded by the lack of a coherent pay system, which has led to huge inequalities within and across Departments, with the gender pay gap standing at more than 11%. I ask the Minister two things. When will the civil service move to a national pay structure, to address these inequalities? When will all public sector workers be treated equally and be rightly acknowledged, with a substantial pay increase for the incredible work they do each and every day on the frontline?

4.51 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I thank my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for opening this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

In the time I have, I will talk about two particular groups of key public sector workers: prison officers and firefighters. Both are key Government workers. Prison officers in particular deserve our praise, recognition and respect for their bravery—as, indeed, do firefighters—not only during the pandemic but year in, year out. As hon. Members may well know, prison officers are banned from taking industrial action; it is a criminal offence even to suggest that they should, for example, start working to rule. In return for the loss of that most basic human right, the independent Prison Service Pay Review Body was established in 2001 to make recommendations

[Grahame Morris]

on pay, which the Government agreed to follow in all but the most exceptional circumstances. To encourage people to join and stay in the Prison Service, the independent Prison Service Pay Review Body recommended a significant pay rise for band 3 officers on fair and sustainable contracts, with new, modernised terms, ending the effectively two-tier workforce.

Five months ago, the Government promised to consider that recommendation and to consult the recognised trade union, the Prison Officers Association, on its implementation. However, on Thursday last, the Government rejected the recommendation, claiming it was unaffordable, without having had any discussion with the Prison Officers Association. Prison officers are understandably angry and have accused the Government of nothing less than pay betrayal. I understand that the Prison Officers Association intends to launch legal action against this decision, and I hope it will receive the full backing of all hon. Members in this place today.

The Prison Service is clearly experiencing a crisis in recruitment and retention, especially of band 3 officers, the main operational entry grade into the service. The review body calculates the cost of new recruits leaving after less than two years' service at around £30 million per annum, a wasteful and inefficient use of public money. That is why the pay review body recommended an immediate £3,000 uplift in pensionable pay, to try to stem the rising tide of resignations. The Government claim that is unaffordable. However, no exceptional circumstances have been cited to justify their decision, as is required. The Government have earmarked around £4 billion for a new generation of private prisons yet claim to have no money to pay prison officers. This is an abuse of power and an insult to people's intelligence.

The situation is unfair and unsustainable, and our prisons suffer as officers vote with their feet and leave the service, taking with them valuable skills, knowledge and experience at a time when we need it most. The Government must think again, treat our prison officers with the respect they deserve, get round the negotiating table with the POA, and make a fair and sustainable offer.

I also want to mention firefighters. I chaired a meeting of the Fire Brigades Union parliamentary group this afternoon. Firefighters had a pay freeze in 2010 and 2011, followed by a 1% public sector pay cap imposed for six years from 2012 to 2017—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I call Lilian Greenwood.

4.55 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on her powerful and eloquent opening speech. I am not sure that I will add anything unique to the debate, but some points bear repetition.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the people who have been delivering our public services during the coronavirus pandemic. Some of them are in public-facing roles that simply cannot be done from home, including social care workers, refuse collectors, firefighters and

border control staff. They have been working hard, day in, day out. They have exposed themselves and their families to additional risks to help to keep us safe, secure and well.

Others who have been working just as hard are often invisible. They are among the unsung heroes of the crisis. I am thinking of the staff working at Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to administer the job retention scheme, or those in the Department for Work and Pensions coping with a huge influx of new universal credit claims. Their work has been just as essential in helping to protect jobs and livelihoods. They were often unprepared and under-resourced to deal with that new sudden demand, but they stepped up. Of course, there are many others. Their reward for that work is to be handed a real-terms pay cut. The Chancellor might try to use softer language, with talk of a pay pause rather than a freeze, but soft language does not pay the bills. Prices are set to rise by 1.4% next year, and many people will be even more shocked when they realise that their council tax bill will go up by 5%. Thousands of public sector workers will be worse off, including every single police officer, every single teacher and 90% of armed forces personnel based in England. As many hon. Members have said, for many of those workers, that is just the latest kick in the teeth, because public sector staff have already endured a decade of cuts in the value of their wages, with many seeing their buying power cut by almost a fifth between 2010 and 2020.

Government Ministers want to pit public sector workers against private sector workers, but it is all smoke and mirrors. Private sector wage growth has fallen behind this year primarily as a result of furlough, having previously run ahead. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, once we adjust for the different profile of public sector workers in terms of experience, education and other factors, there is no difference in hourly pay rates compared with the private sector. The truth is that such divisive language helps no one. We all lose as a result of the proposals. It is noticeable that not a single Back-Bench Conservative MP has dared to turn up and defend them.

In Nottingham, 23% of all employees work in the public sector, which is significantly higher than the average for the east midlands or Britain, although of course there are parts of the country where it is far higher still. When the pay of those workers is cut, they have less to spend in local shops and with local businesses. Freezing their pay harms the local economy and risks the jobs of the private sector workers employed in those shops and businesses. At a time when our local high streets are suffering real damage and small businesses do not know whether they will survive the pandemic, this pay policy delivers a further blow to confidence and risks further weakening a weak recovery.

The Minister should think again. We need action to save jobs, rebuild businesses and get the economy back on its feet. Instead of cutting real wages, the Government should be boosting them, particularly for the lowest paid. That is the right thing to do ethically and economically.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Unusually, there have been no interventions and some Members have not turned up, so I will increase the time limit for Back-Bench speakers to five minutes.

4.59 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for securing this important debate. I want to talk about the workers who throughout this pandemic have delivered furlough schemes, processed millions of new claims for universal credit, and kept the courts, ports and airports open and our prisons safe and secure. When we as a nation applaud our key workers, those key workers are often forgotten. Worst of all, they have been abandoned by the Government.

Unfortunately, the words, “civil servant”, still conjure up visions of “Yes Minister” for many people—including, it seems, the Government. Nothing could be further from the reality. The truth is that civil servants have suffered years of real-terms pay cuts. The average civil servant on a salary of £26,000 is now worse off by £2,110 a year compared with 2010. Following the end of national pay bargaining, there are now over 200 sets of pay negotiations in the civil service and related areas. What that means in reality is that there are huge inequalities in the pay of civil servants, with many falling into poverty pay. In HMRC, 12,000 staff—around one in five—are paid at the minimum wage or just above. It is unacceptable to have Government workers forced into poverty.

Then we come to another group of workers who are often overlooked: prison officers. As my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) has just said, they deserve not just our praise but our respect for their courage in the course of their work, year in, year out. Covid has made a dangerous job even worse. In my constituency, we recently heard of an outbreak at HMP Frankland, where more than 200 members of the prison staff were off with covid symptoms or were self-isolating. That puts enormous pressure on the remaining staff, yet just last week the Government rejected a key recommendation from an independent body to raise the salaries of people on the frontline. It is nothing less than a kick in the teeth for hard-working and loyal public servants. As hon. Members have pointed out, prison officers are banned from taking any sort of industrial action. I disagree with such a limiting of their basic rights.

The Prison Service Pay Review Body recommended a significant pay rise for band 3 officers. Without justification or reason, the Government claim that is unaffordable. Of course, we know where this all leads—prison officers will vote with their feet and leave the service they love. We will lose valuable knowledge and experience at a time when we need it most. As experience goes down, violence goes up, leading to more officers leaving and so on. It is a vicious cycle.

Civil servants do thankless work. They do not want applause; they want to be rewarded fairly for the work that they do. The Government should listen to the Public and Commercial Services Union and start to restore the real value of civil servants’ pay with a 10% increase. On prison officer pay, the Government should think again and listen to the Prison Officers Association and the Prison Service Pay Review Body. The demands are not excessive; they are simply about keeping key workers’ heads above water and giving them some decency, respect and fairness. Surely that is the least we can do.

5.3 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for her excellent speech when opening the debate. In fact, all the speeches that we have heard so far have been outstanding, and I associate myself with all of them.

I want to begin by thanking the 353 constituents of Enfield, Southgate who have signed the two petitions that have led to today’s Westminster Hall debate. I thank our public sector workers, who have provided such an incredible public service in our hospitals and social care sector, our local councils, our communities, our schools, our courts and prisons across the whole justice sector, and our jobcentres. I also thank all those working in the emergency services in every public sector that I have not had time to mention. These have been incredibly strange circumstances, and if it was not for their stepping up to help, we would have been in a much worse situation.

From speaking to public sector workers, I know that working in the sector is a vocation for many people, and they have a real desire to serve. That is despite a decade of cuts and austerity and the huge pressures that have been placed on people just doing their everyday job. I want to explode the myth that public sector workers are paid far more than private sector workers. That is simply not true. According to figures from the Office for National Statistics, after years and years of below inflation pay rises and pay freezes, public sector workers earn 3% less than private sector workers. We need to make sure that that is not forgotten. Rather than reward all public sector workers for their hard work, the Government have chosen to divide and rule, and give some public sector workers a pay rise while giving a slap in the face to others. That is clearly unacceptable.

The Government do not realise the huge amount of good will that public sector workers provide in doing their jobs under the most trying circumstances. Before becoming a Member of Parliament, I worked in local government, with some extraordinary people who would often go far beyond the call of duty, just to get the job done. That was after years of cuts, not only in staffing levels that made their work extremely hard but in resources as well.

In my borough of Enfield, I helped volunteers to deliver food parcels at the start of the pandemic. That was arranged and organised by Enfield Council’s amazing staff, who were not just doing their everyday job. They were seconded to do this as an additional job, to make sure that people who were in dire need got the food that they needed. It was an incredible achievement and they showed that they were stepping up to do that. I ask in all honesty, how can the Government justify not giving these public sector workers a pay increase? When the chips were down, our public sector workers did what they had to do to get us through this. It is only right and proper that they get the reward that they deserve, and not an appalling snub from the Government.

5.6 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for securing this important debate

[Navendu Mishra]

at a time when key workers have done so much on the frontline of the covid crisis to keep us all safe and our country moving. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, in particular my trade union membership.

As a former retail worker on the shop floor for six years, it is important for me to mention shop workers. Shop workers are key workers. If there is one thing that the pandemic has demonstrated, it is that the shop workers, cleaners and transport workers who are working at the coalface of this crisis are key workers who deserve not only our respect but fair pay, terms and conditions.

We must therefore look again at what support we give them. Recent research by the Trades Union Congress suggests that 3.7 million key workers—that is 38% of all key workers—earn less than £10 per hour. That is not reflective of the service they provide and it is why we must raise the minimum wage to £10 per hour at the very least, as well as put an end to unfair youth rates.

Moving on to the civil service, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) made the point that the current system of having over 200 sets of pay talks is hugely inefficient. When will the civil service address that poor practice by implementing a coherent pay system that covers all its workers through one set of centralised negotiations? Research by the Public and Commercial Services Union, which has done so much to bring this issue to the fore and whose petition has now received more than 100,000 signatures, revealed that in the past decade, since the Conservatives entered Government in 2010, civil service pay has fallen in value by up to 20%, with the average civil servant now worse off by more than £2,100 every single year.

Not only is that unacceptable, it is a completely unsustainable position for those who are earning less, year on year. Instead of rewarding Government workers and local government staff for continuing to deliver council services during the most challenging circumstances this year, there was a deep sense of injustice that the Chancellor instead used his spending review to announce a public sector pay freeze. The Fire Brigades Union, which represents firefighters who put their lives on the line for us on a daily basis, subsequently criticised the Government for divide and rule tactics, which is understandable, given that the wealthiest corporations have been allowed to cash in on the pandemic without shouldering any of the burden.

There must also be a new deal for retail, distribution and home delivery workers, based around a real living wage as defined by the Living Wage Foundation—not the version this Government have appropriated—and guaranteed hours. As we have seen time and time again during this pandemic, it is imperative that we have meaningful statutory sick pay. The current provision is not fit for purpose and offers little support for those who are sick, having to self-isolate or look after loved ones.

A good route for the Treasury to raise revenue is by ensuring that businesses pay their fair share of tax, by tackling tax avoidance and the use of offshore havens once and for all. For example, over the past 20 years, Amazon paid just £61.7 million in corporation tax, despite its UK sales surging more than 26% to almost £14 billion in the past year alone. We cannot continue

down a path on which businesses can afford to pay out millions to shareholders but plead poverty when it comes to paying decent wages to the staff members who create their profits and support our communities. As the Government stall on their support for workers, I urge all workers to join a trade union for the protection and dignity that they deserve.

5.10 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and the Petitions Committee for this debate. I also thank those of my constituents who contacted me about both public sector and key worker pay, including the 700 Jarrow constituents who put their names to both petitions.

As colleagues have pointed out, we cannot let this argument descend into one about levelling down; there should be fair pay in both the private and the public sectors. We should not let the debate become a tool for the Government to pit private and public sector workers against each other once again. Week after week at Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister attacks the Opposition for caring about or focusing on the public sector alone. He recently said that there is a

“deep underlying Labour hatred of the private sector”.—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 818.]

That is, of course, not the case, but how can public sector workers support private businesses if they cannot afford to buy their products or pay for their services? That simply makes no economic sense.

The pay freeze for public sector workers comes on top of an 11-year pay restraint. Ten years ago, the Government implemented a two-year pay freeze that was followed by a six-year pay cap of 1%. Since, average salary levels in the civil service have fallen in value by comparison with inflation. This point has already been made, but I will reiterate it because I think it is important: that means that the average civil servant on a salary of £26,000 is now worse off by more than £2,000 a year.

Hard-working civil servants in my Jarrow constituency simply cannot afford a further pay freeze and, frankly, they do not deserve it. A great number of the civil servants in my constituency are employed by the Department for Work and Pensions in Newcastle. Many of those who administer benefits are at virtually the same income levels as those receiving them. How is that situation sustainable?

We all recognise the huge economic impact that the pandemic has had, but public servants and key workers across sectors have kept the country running during this difficult time, and they deserve a pay rise, not a real-terms pay cut. Not only is the pay freeze unfair, it also makes no economic sense: research from the New Economics Foundation found that paying all public sector workers a real living wage and increasing public sector pay would boost GDP by between £1.1 billion and £2.1 billion, with an increased tax take of between £370 million and £700 million.

There must be no return to the austerity programme implemented in the aftermath of the crash. Ten years of a flatlining economy has exposed the economic illiteracy of austerity, and a significant uplift in pay should be central to the post-pandemic recovery across all sectors

of our workforce. Yes, we need to thank public sector and key workers for all that they have done throughout the crisis and beyond, but, Minister, thanking and clapping them on doorsteps is not enough. They simply need a pay rise.

5.14 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak briefly in Westminster Hall. I thank and congratulate my good and hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on securing this important debate, which reflects her long-held commitment to working people.

The people of Newport West work hard, look out for their neighbours and, where they can, help out—they never walk by on the other side. That is why so many of them have been in touch with me in recent weeks and months, urging me to call on Tory Ministers to act quickly. “Act on what?” some might ask. They do not want Ministers just to clap or say nice words; they want real action to show those who are keeping our country going that we really care and that we recognise their contribution in the most difficult of circumstances.

Like so many in this House and across the country, I have heard from constituents who want this place to do what our public sector and key workers have done for us in recent months: to go the extra mile and show that we care. Before my election to this place, I worked in our national health service for more than 30 years. Every day, I saw people working to keep our communities safe and our people alive. The least we can do is give something back.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gower illustrated, public sector workers have endured a decade of severe cuts in the value of their wages, with many seeing the buying power of their pay packet fall by almost a fifth between 2010 and 2020. At the same time, the private sector has far outstripped the public sector, as private sector pay grew at between 2% and 2.5% per year during the six years of the public sector pay freeze and pay cap.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) stated, the latest Office for National Statistics analysis shows that, contrary to the myths, public sector workers earned 3% less than private sector workers in comparable jobs. These statistics show the importance of standing up for and siding with public sector workers in these tough times. Like other Opposition Members, I will be doing exactly that. It is important that we do that because the Government’s latest pay policy is set to heap further damage on public sector workers, as the forecast inflation rate for 2021 suggests that all public sector staff outside the NHS will see a decline in the value of their wages, whether they receive their £250 payment or not.

While the Government’s pay policy should be opposed unconditionally—I do so with the knowledge that many of my constituents do so, too—there are still answers that Ministers must provide. The rationale for the pay policy announcement was that the pay pause would protect public sector jobs. What measures and funding will the Government put in place to ensure that jobs are not lost and how is that objective being communicated to employers in the public sector? I look forward to the Minister’s explanation in her response.

I know that time is short, but I wanted to speak in this debate to show our key workers that there are some in this place who care. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Gower and many others in pledging to do all I can to stand with them and stand up for them in the opportunities that I have.

5.17 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to be called in this debate. I thank the Petitions Committee for prioritising such an important issue. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

We know that the petitioners have worked night and day to keep us safe over the past nine months. Although they have had plenty of claps and slaps on the back, the Chancellor’s statement came as a slap in the face, when so many looked at their pay statements at the end of the month and once again realised that they still could not make the bills pay and the balances match.

As a result, it is right that we debate public sector pay in this place, because Britain does deserve a pay rise. Although I welcome the pay rise for our NHS workers, we still do not have the remit, we do not know how that process will work, we do not know whether it will be capped by the Government and if so, to what extent, and we do not know whether the Government will fully fund it, or expect our cash-strapped NHS trust to dig deeper into the money it does not have.

One thing is for sure: we need to ensure that level of pay across the board. It is not only about our NHS workers. Our care workers, our local government workers, the people who have worked through the night trying to get people on to benefits as fast as possible, our teachers, our firefighters and our police all need that recognition. There are so many more I could mention. Curtailing their pay comes on the back of a decade of injustice in the pay system.

So many of those staff have been subject to reorganisation that has resulted in downbanding and loss of wages. We have also seen significant cuts to pensions and deferred wages for many of these workers. In the Chancellor’s statement we see history repeating itself. For a decade, the Government have not addressed the real economic crisis in our country; they have created another one, shifting the burden on to the lowest paid.

To give the lowest-paid in our country an increase of just 10p an hour is an insult after they have cared for people in their time of need over the last few months—not least those workers in care homes who have put their own lives at risk in order to support our communities. Those workers, who are mainly women and mainly black and ethnic minority, and disabled workers, are the people who are worst hit in our economy, so this is a real pay injustice, discriminating against people who are working.

The Government are always proud to talk about their national living wage, which is only £8.72 an hour. In 2015, the then Chancellor announced that by 2020 we would be on at least £9 an hour. We have not even reached that point. Of course, Labour made it very clear at the last election that we believe that we should start at £10 an hour, recognising that people have to live, survive and pay their bills, as opposed to having such pay restraint.

[*Rachael Maskell*]

An increase would not be at huge cost to the Government; they could borrow and invest, which is what will make the difference to our economy. The TUC calculates that just a 2% increase would boost GDP by £1.1 billion to £2.1 billion—money that the Government could really do with at this time—and tax take would increase by up to £7 million. It is therefore not a zero-sum game: not just workers, but the Government gain.

Finally, because time is limited, we need to look again at how pay is arranged in our country. So many workers are not covered by any collective bargaining processes, and are, as a result, at the behest of their employers having additional money at the end of the year to pay them. It is completely unsatisfactory, and it is particularly the low-paid who are not part of collective bargaining arrangements.

I therefore call on the Minister to review what is happening across our pay system, and how it discriminates, to ensure that low-paid workers are not left out of pay deals. That is vital, as they are the people most in need. At a time when our economy needs such investment and our workers need to be acknowledged for all that they have done, I say to the Minister that it is time that British workers had a proper pay rise.

5.22 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer.

The House of Commons Library tells me that the Glasgow South West constituency has the highest percentage of workers in public sector employment, so it is only fitting that I contribute to the debate. I refer colleagues to the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I chair the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group, I worked 25 years before arriving in this place in the public sector, and I am a proud trade unionist of 20 years' trade union activity. I would safely argue that the best political education and lifelong learning that one can achieve is through being a trade union activist.

I thank the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for leading the debate. I use the word "debate" advisedly because no one has justified the Government's position. The history that others have referred to is important. In 2010, there was a two-year pay freeze and then there was a six-year pay cap of 1%. Other Departments maintained that pay cap.

Public sector workers and civil servants have, during the last nine months, performed heroics, and the general public seem to think so too, with more than 100,000 people signing the petitions. The point has been made that the devolved Administrations have provided pay for NHS staff—£500, as a thank-you payment—and frankly we have seen a disgraceful response from the Treasury, which wishes to take tax and national insurance off that payment. I really hope that the Treasury thinks again on that point.

I will confine most of my remarks to the civil service and what it has done over the past nine months, including administering millions of new universal credit claims for the Department for Work and Pensions and processing furlough payments in Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, all despite—this has to be emphasised—staff in a number

of Departments not being provided with the proper equipment for homeworking during the crisis, including in the Department for Work and Pensions.

Colleagues made the point about the problems of low pay in HMRC. I emphasise again that the median salary in HMRC is the lowest across the civil service. Is that not ironic, given that a key role of HMRC is to chase all these rogues—the Googles, the Vodafones and all these other companies that have not been paying their tax for years—and try to collect that tax? Around one in five staff is paid the minimum wage or just above it, but there is also another issue. It is clear that pay delegation has also led to pay segregation by gender, and that the gender pay gap can only be reduced by increasing the pay of staff in the lowest-paid Departments and agencies.

It is really disappointing that not one Government Back Bencher is here to justify these policies; people watching will wonder why the Government have thrown in the towel in the middle of the debate. However, I can tell hon. Members that PCS members have been sharing emails they have received from Government Back Benchers in reply to their request to not go ahead with this public sector pay freeze. I think the politest term I have heard is "short and sniffy responses". It seems that the position of many Government Back Benchers is that public sector workers should be thankful for their job security. Tory MPs could perhaps tell that to the 2,000 workers in HMRC facing redundancy at the end of the year and knowing that vacancies within that Department are not being offered to them but are instead being farmed out to agency staff, and God knows the cost to the taxpayer of the more than 100,000 civil servants who have lost their jobs in the past decade due to Tory austerity. The Prime Minister responded to me, as emphasised by the hon. Member for Gower, that he was "lost in admiration" for the work of the civil service during the covid crisis. I can only suggest that a pay freeze is an extraordinary way of showing that.

A public sector pay freeze is both counterproductive and economically illiterate, and it gets to the whole debate on the role of the public sector itself. Research before the pandemic consistently showed that 70p in every pound of public money ends up in the private sector economy, whether via grants, contracts or, indeed, public sector workers' wages. We really need to end the notion that public sector workers, when they get a pay increase, hide it in a shoe box under the mattress. That is not how it works, I can tell you. When people get more money in their pockets, they spend it, and they spend it in the private sector. If we are serious about helping the private sector and about ensuring that the economic wheels turn, it surely stands to reason that public sector workers, as thanks for all the work they have done over the past nine months, should get a proper pay rise.

I hope that the Minister will tell us what progress is being made in ending the 200-plus bargaining units across Whitehall Departments. I hope that the Government—this political party of small government and efficiency—will tell us how they will enact that particular policy. Workers in Westminster Departments are moving to the Departments of devolved Administrations. Why? Because the devolved Administrations pay better wages.

There can be no return to the austerity programme that flatlined the economy. A public sector pay rise could start the post-pandemic recovery. Investment is required

in the civil service to reflect the changed circumstances in which we now find ourselves. I and my SNP colleagues support the demands of the petition because they are morally just and economically sound.

5.29 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for securing this important debate. It is important that we continue to support key workers as they have supported us through this difficult time for the whole country. She spoke about a number of things, but I will touch on her point about the Welsh Government trying to reward care homes and the Chancellor trying to tax them. She mentioned value for money for taxpayers. I agree that public sector workers pay their taxes too and deserve to be treated fairly.

I thank all hon. Members who have spoken to support key workers in their constituencies. I am disappointed that not a single Tory Back Bencher has turned up to speak. It is important that we speak for the individuals we seek to represent. The fact that not a single one has turned up speaks volumes.

Several hon. Members have made moving and passionate contributions that have highlighted the strength and passion of key workers across the country. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) talked about the 10-year pay freeze. People are hurting. I echo his point that the Minister should get back to the roundtable with the unions to negotiate a decent pay rise. I hope she takes that forward.

Like many others, my hon. Friends the Members for Bootle (Peter Dowd), for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) and for Newport West (Ruth Jones) talked about how important it is for public sector workers to get a pay rise. My hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) talked about their direct experience of working in local government. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate also talked about how he has been delivering food parcels.

My hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Wavertree and for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) talked about the pressures that civil servants are facing. A recommendation was made to move towards a national infrastructure for the recovery. I am interested to hear what the Minister says on that point. I echo the comments of my hon. Friends the Members for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) about treating prison officers with respect. I have three prisons in my constituency and I know the amount of pressure that prison officers are facing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) rightly pointed out that council tax will go up, which will have an impact on key workers whose salaries have been frozen for some time. How is that sustainable? My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about the cuts to pensions and how the story is essentially repeating itself. She said that the Government have not really addressed the economic crisis and the 10p an hour increase is an insult. She talked about how pay injustice has affected women, ethnic minorities and disabled people.

Freezing public sector pay was one of the coalition Government's first actions in 2010. That was followed by a six-year pay cap of 1%. Over the past decade, NHS workers have lost an average of 15% of their wages as their salaries have failed to rise in line with inflation. On Friday, I heard from Royal College of Nursing members about the impact that that was having on them mentally, and the amount of pressure that they are under.

The average civil servant on a salary of £26,000 is now worse off by £2,110 a year. As hon. Members have mentioned, the Chancellor announced in his spending review that the 2.1 million public sector workers who earn less than £24,000 will receive a minimum £250 increase because of inflation. A £250 pay increase will result in a pay cut for any public sector worker earning less than £18,000. Once again, the Government have shown how much they value key workers by hiding a pay cut at the heart of their false promises.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. If the hon. Gentleman had been here at the beginning of the debate, he would have heard me explain that hon. Members can take part only if they are present at the beginning, regardless of whether it is to make an intervention or give a speech.

Abena Oppong-Asare: Young people in my constituency of Erith and Thamesmead have been submitting portraits of key workers as part of my Christmas card competition. I asked them to write why the key worker they have drawn means so much to them, and one young person said to me:

"I have chosen to draw many different key workers...They have been pushing themselves every day so they can help us. They have put us first and we should be indebted to them."

Does the Minister agree that we are indebted to key workers, given their hard work and sacrifice during this pandemic?

Freezing pay for public sector workers is not only insulting, but irresponsible. I am curious to know whether the Minister has given due regard to the impacts that the pay freeze will have. Has the Minister read the report by the TUC, which found that public sector pay increases could boost GDP significantly? That has been echoed by a number of Members in the debate. Does the Minister recognise that imposing a real-terms pay cut, when 1.8 million key workers already earn less than the real living wage, risks driving thousands into poverty? Can the Minister explain how she plans to tackle the shortage of over 80,000 NHS and care sector jobs at the same time as freezing public sector pay?

Over 1 million key workers face a real-terms pay cut next year. That includes 125,000 police officers, 500,000 teachers, 300,000 civil service staff and 125,000 armed forces personnel. By failing to reaffirm the Government's manifesto commitment to ensure that teachers' starting salaries reach £30,000 by 2022, the Chancellor has made it clear that he has no intention to back our public sector workers. Cutting universal credit, and giving the go-ahead for council tax rises in the middle of a pandemic, is pushing more people into poverty. The Government are making poor spending decisions that threaten to push our economy and public services to breaking point.

[Abena Oppong-Asare]

I want to conclude by quoting my hon. Friend the Member for Gower. Public sector workers are not asking for a lot. They just want their contributions to be recognised, and claps do not pay the bills.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I ask the Minister to leave enough time at the end—we have plenty of time—for the proposer of the debate to wind up.

5.38 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): Thank you, Mr Stringer. It is a tradition on occasions such as this to congratulate the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on securing a debate on the issue of the day. Today, however, we should also congratulate the thousands of people who secured the debate by taking the time to express their support for key workers. On hundreds of occasions, Government Ministers have, in public and in private, expressed their gratitude and respect for what our millions of key workers have done, and I would like to do so again.

I would also like to express my condolences to the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) and his family on the death of his daughter. As a mother of three, I cannot even begin to imagine such a loss. We are divided by politics but united in our passion for public service, and I pay tribute both to him and to her for all her service.

We tend to think of key workers as nurses, teachers and police officers, whose efforts, as ever, have been invaluable. In the context of the pandemic, however, our understanding of who is key has rightly stretched far more widely, which is pertinent for the subject of the debate. Understanding who is key extends to local government, national Government, transport, utilities and communications. Importantly, many of the people on whom we have relied are in the public sector. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said they are the people who kept the country going, but it is not just the public sector. Food retail workers, train conductors, farmers and lorry drivers—every one of them is a crucial link in the chain and deserves our thanks.

The substance of today's debate is asking why we choose restraint when it comes to the way in which some of those in the public sector are financially rewarded. Hon. Members will know the answer. Many, in fact, have referenced fiscal policy since 2010. They should all know—if not, I am happy to remind them—that it was the difficult decisions we made during that period that have enabled us to borrow to fund such a significant package of support. Members have repeatedly said today, "We should borrow." We are borrowing. A year ago, who would have believed that we would have spent £43 billion on people to be furloughed, £13.7 billion on the self-employed, and over £280 billion in total, in the space of eight months, on an unexpected pandemic?

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Kemi Badenoch: No, I am afraid I am not giving way.

I am also happy to remind hon. Members that almost exactly a year ago, after nine years of Conservatives in Government and the very same fiscal policies that hon. Members have criticised today, the public chose to

renew their faith and trust in this Government—not just with an increased share of the vote, but with a much increased majority. Since 2010, they had heard these arguments about what we were doing on fiscal policy over and over again, from many colleagues on the Opposition Benches who are not in the House today. We all believe in fair pay, but we disagree on where it is sent. However, I remind hon. Members that the public also want fiscal responsibility.

Good government is about making the right choices. To paraphrase the Chancellor, our health emergency is not yet over, while our economic emergency has only just begun. At a time like this, it is the responsibility—in fact, the duty—of Government to prioritise and target support where it is most needed, in a way that is fair and sustainable, that protects jobs and businesses, and that limits long-term damage to the economy. The hon. Member for Gower referenced many previous responses the Government have given on this topic. She may not like the answer, but the facts have not changed, and I am happy to repeat them here. Fairness has been a guiding principle.

Mary Kelly Foy: Will the Minister give way?

Kemi Badenoch: I am not giving way. I have already said I am not; please stop asking.

As the Chancellor pointed out in his statement on the spending review, in the six months to September, private sector wages fell by nearly 1% compared with last year. Over the same period, public sector wages rose by nearly 4%. Workers in the private sector have lost jobs, been furloughed, and seen their wages cut and their hours reduced, while those in the public sector have not. [Interruption.]

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. Carry on.

Kemi Badenoch: Thank you, Mr Stringer. For that reason, the Chancellor announced a temporary pause to pay awards for some public sector workers for the year 2021-22. Disappointing though I know this will be, this approach allows us to protect public sector jobs at this time of crisis and ensure fairness between the private and public sectors. Crucially, as I have said, we are targeting our resources at those who need them most. First, taking account of the NHS Pay Review Body's advice, we are providing a pay rise to over 1 million nurses, doctors and others working in the NHS. Secondly, we are protecting those on lower incomes. The 2.1 million public sector workers who earn below the median wage of £24,000 will be guaranteed a pay rise of at least—and I emphasise "at least"—£250.

In the spending review, we also accepted in full the recommendations of the Low Pay Commission—to increase the national living wage by 2.2% to £8.91 an hour, to extend that rate to those aged 23 and over, and to increase the national minimum wage. According to the commission, those rates will give low-paid workers a real-terms pay rise and protect their standards of living without significant risks to their job prospects. A full-time worker on the national living wage will also see their annual earnings increase by £345 next year. That is a pay rise of over £4,000 compared with 2016, the year in which the policy was first introduced. Taken together, these minimum wage increases will likely benefit around 2 million people and help make real progress towards ending low pay in the UK.

The risk with broader-brush measures, including income tax or national insurance policies—this particular point was not made today, but it is an important one to reiterate—is that it is difficult to define and limit who should benefit. The result could merely be to reward the better paid, at a time when the Government have already been forecast to be borrowing at record peacetime levels.

As a Government, we are committed to keeping taxes low in order that working people, including key workers, are able to keep more of what they earn. In April 2019, the Government increased the personal tax allowance to £12,500, meaning that the personal allowance is up by more than 90% in less than a decade, ensuring that more of the lowest earners do not pay any income tax at all. In April this year, we also increased the national insurance contributions primary threshold and lower profits limit to £9,500—a move that will benefit 31 million people. Add all that together, and changes to income tax and national insurance contributions between 2010-11 and 2020-21 mean that a typical basic rate employee in England, Wales or Northern Ireland is more than £1,600 better off a year.

Mary Kelly Foy: Will the Minister give way, with 15 minutes to go?

Kemi Badenoch: I will conclude by saying that this Government and all the people of this country are grateful for everything that our key workers in both the public and the private sector have done and continue to do, but in the choices we make, we must chart a way ahead that is fair and sustainable and that gives us the best chance of a strong economic recovery. That is the thinking behind what we have done and it will remain the thinking behind what we do in the challenging months and years ahead, as I believe it should.

Chris Stephens: On a point of order, Mr Stringer. If I heard the Minister correctly, it was suggested that there were to be no job losses in the public sector, yet a number of us in the debate mentioned that there were 2,000 redundancies in HMRC. Mr Stringer, can you tell me how the record can be corrected—or has the Minister just cancelled the redundancy notices of 2,000 workers in HMRC?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): That is not a point of order; it is a matter of fact and for debate.

5.47 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi: I will, on behalf of the Petitions Committee, thank the Minister for the Government response. However, I am very disappointed, as are many

of my colleagues here today, that she was unable to take any interventions from us in what is meant to be a debate. It is really difficult that the Government do not recognise the challenges that key workers face. It is evident that the Government are not hearing what people are saying when one petition has nearly 150,000 signatures and the other just over 100,000. It is striking to all of us that our constituents and many people and key workers across the UK do not recognise what has been said. In fact, I am only in this place because I was a teacher for more than 20 years and, since 2010, the public sector workers' pay freeze has had a massive impact on so many people's lives and the quality of their lives.

What is going to happen from 1 January? We do not actually know the impact on our key workers and how many will have to leave or may be unable to fill these jobs. I worry about the future, because I worry about our future generations. Being a key worker or being in the public sector means that you are in a vocation. That is what we have seen through the pandemic: people are in a vocation and they give of their best to help everybody else; it is that vocation that drives them forward. To be in a vocation is an honour, but how do we now tell this to our children, whose education has been hammered, who have not been able to sit exams and who have not been able to secure a future for themselves? Yes, there are plenty of jobs out there in the public sector, but why would they want to take a job in the public sector when this is how they are treated by this Government?

Does the Minister recognise that imposing a real-terms pay cut when 1.8 million key workers already earn less than the living wage risks driving thousands into poverty? That poverty, moving forward, is what I am concerned about. That we have to volunteer at food banks and deliver food hampers to people who just cannot put food on the table, at Christmas and throughout the year, is not good enough. That the Minister did not reaffirm the Government's manifesto promises is an absolute disgrace.

I could go on and on, but I will not. My colleagues have not had the opportunity to have a proper debate in Westminster Hall, and that is extremely disappointing. I thank you, Mr Stringer, for your chairship, and I thank the petitioners, who tried to get their message across today but who, unfortunately, were not listened to, as we were unable to have a proper debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 306845 and 328754, relating to financial rewards for government workers and keyworkers.

5.51 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Vaccination

[SIR DAVID AMESS *in the Chair*]

6 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 323442, relating to vaccination for Covid-19.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. The petition is entitled,

“Prevent any restrictions on those who refuse a Covid-19 vaccination”.

To date, more than 307,000 people have signed it, including 641 from my constituency. It states:

“I want the Government to prevent any restrictions being placed on those who refuse to have any potential Covid-19 vaccine. This includes restrictions on travel, social events, such as concerts or sports. No restrictions whatsoever. You cannot force someone to have a vaccination, and should not be able to coerce them into it by way of restrictions. We have to the right to assess the risk ourselves as we have done in the past.”

The Government’s reply states categorically:

“There are currently no plans to place restrictions on those who refuse to have any potential Covid-19 vaccine.”

So there we are. I quite agree that, in a modern liberal democracy, the state cannot and should not force someone to put something into their body, nor should it introduce punitive measures against those who refuse to do so. The Government have confirmed in their reply that they have no such intention, but rather than leaving it at that I will make some remarks. As the petition gives us the opportunity to discuss vaccinations, I will urge people to get the vaccine when their time comes. In doing so, I will offer reassurance about the safety of not just this vaccine but others, which also go through rigorous trials before being distributed to the public. I also want to dispel some of the myths about vaccinations.

We can be proud that a Brit, Edward Jenner, first discovered vaccinations in the form that we know them today. In 1796—a year that none of us was around for, I am sure—Jenner demonstrated that a mild infection with the cowpox virus conferred immunity against the deadly smallpox virus. Cowpox served as the natural vaccine for smallpox until a more modern vaccine emerged in the 19th century, laying the groundwork for the system of vaccinations that we know today. Smallpox remains the only virus that is considered to be eradicated internationally since its eradication was declared in 1980.

Since Jenner’s discovery, vaccines have been developed to offer immunity to a whole range of viruses, such as measles, mumps, rubella, influenza, tetanus, polio, diphtheria, yellow fever, rabies, hepatitis, human papillomavirus, meningitis and so many more. It is easy, therefore, to take vaccines for granted, but I invite colleagues to have a think just for a moment about the impact that vaccines have had on the world. Those illnesses would once have struck dread, fear and anguish into the millions who were diagnosed with them. Yet today our lives are quietly unaffected by those horrors, thanks to the seemingly simple concept of quick action through vaccines.

Of course, when we have to put things into our bodies, we want to know that they are safe, and vaccines have some of the most—if not the most—rigorous safety

tests in the world. One of the most common questions I receive from my constituents, which I am sure other hon. Members receive from theirs, is about how we know whether the covid vaccine is safe. Vaccines are not like electrical items such as new iPhones, which go through some initial testing and then into the market. When initial flaws are found, they are then brought out with new additions to address those flaws. Vaccines have to be considered safe from day one.

The standard for testing and monitoring vaccines is higher than for most other medicines, because they are unusual in the medical world in that they are put into the bodies of healthy people, especially healthy children. That means that the acceptable level of risk of harm is much lower than in cancer treatment, for example, for which we accept a certain level of risk, given the illness that we are battling.

According to the Oxford Vaccine Group, the following are just some of the stages that a vaccine has to go through before use: a literature review to look at what has been done before; a theoretical development or innovation, coming up with a new idea or varying an existing one; and laboratory testing and development, involving in vitro testing using individual cells and in vivo testing, which often uses mice. Even at that early stage, when the vaccine is not being tested on humans, it still has to pass rigorous safety tests to demonstrate that it works.

After that stage, it will move on to a phase 1 study: an initial trial of a small group of adult participants, normally up to only 100, carried out to ensure that the vaccine does not have a major safety concern in humans and to work out the most effective dose. We then move on to a phase 2 study: a trial with a larger group of participants, normally several hundred, to check that the vaccine works consistently across various groups of people and to look at whether it starts to generate an immune response. It is also in this stage that we start to find out any potential side-effects.

After that stage, we move on to a phase 3 study: a trial of a much larger group of people—normally several thousand. Those trials gather statistically significant data on the vaccine’s safety and efficacy, which means looking at whether the vaccine generates the level of immunity that would prevent disease, and which provides evidence that the vaccine can actually reduce the number of cases. The phase 3 study also gives us a better chance of understanding side-effects, particularly rarer side-effects that might not have been caught in the phase 2 trials.

After the phase 3 studies, we move into licensing and expert review of all trial data by the UK Government and the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. At that stage, regulators check that the trials show that the product meets the necessary efficacy and safety levels. They also ensure that, for example, the product’s advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. After the vaccine is disseminated to the public, phase 4 studies start: post-marketing surveillance of the vaccine to monitor the effects after it has been administered to the general population.

That is quite a substantial list of safety tests, but it does not stop there, because the vaccine, and the trials used to test it, must also meet a set of regulations. They include regulations laid down in international conference on harmonisation good clinical practice; the declaration of Helsinki, which is about ethical principles for medical

research involving human subjects; the EU clinical trials directive, enshrined in UK law by the Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) Regulations 2004; and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health guidelines for the ethical conduct of medical research involving children.

In addition to that additional layer of safety, for trials in the United Kingdom the vaccine and the trials used in its development must receive individual approval from the MHRA, while the trial itself must be approved by an NHS research ethics committee, a local NHS research and development office, and the Health and Safety Executive. That is quite an extensive list of tests and regulations that a vaccine has to go through before it is considered safe to be used by the wider public.

Vaccines go through rigorous testing, and all information relating to their testing, licensing, side-effects and so on is available for public scrutiny. Vaccines are also constantly monitored after approval. The extensive list of stages a new vaccine must go through raises the question of how the covid-19 vaccine—the Pfizer vaccine currently being rolled out—was approved so quickly. Vaccines can take several years to be approved, so that is a fair question, which we must answer.

To reassure people, there are several answers, and I am sure that the Minister will have further details. The first obvious reason why this particular vaccine has been rolled out so fast is the huge international effort that has gone into finding a vaccine for covid-19, and the funding that has gone along with it. Finding a working vaccine has been the primary, if not sole, job of many of the world's scientists for much of the past year, and has been backed by funding from various foreign Governments.

Dr June Raine, the chief executive of the MHRA, has explained further how the UK in particular was able to approve the vaccine so quickly. I advise people to look at her article in *The Times* titled, "How we backed a Covid vaccine before the rest of the West", in which she spoke of the work that went into getting preparations in place before the vaccine data arrived, meaning that the MHRA was not starting from scratch. That included setting up an independent expert working panel in June, preparing laboratories for batch testing in September, and reviewing rolling data from Pfizer from October. That meant that by 23 November, when the final data submission arrived at the MHRA, good progress had already been made so that it could review the data, consult with the Commission on Human Medicines and approve the vaccine for use once satisfied, with no corners cut and no stone left unturned.

It is only natural to have questions about something that we put into our bodies, so I hope that that offers some peace of mind. People should ask questions, speak to their GP, pharmacist and so on about this or any vaccine, and find out the information that they want to know. Go to those with the knowledge—please do not listen to dangerous internet conspiracy theories.

If people need any proof that the anti-vax movement is driven by anything but concern for public safety, they need look no further than Brian Deer's excellent book, "The Doctor Who Fooled the World: Andrew Wakefield's War on Vaccines", which I had the pleasure of reading before today's debate. He expertly demonstrates the lies, the bad science, the personal ambition and everything in between that drives this well-funded and well-organised

movement, which has ulterior motives to the ones it claims publicly. Because of the anti-vax movement, children are now dying from illnesses that they could easily have been prevented from contracting, such as measles, mumps and rubella, which is an absolute disgrace.

Vaccines are not just safe, but they are a marvel of hundreds of years of medical and scientific research. A seemingly simple concept of an injection, over in a matter of seconds, will prevent people from contracting ailments that would otherwise have caused them life-changing harm or even death. I hope I have managed to demonstrate that vaccines in the UK go through the strongest possible checks for safety before they can be used.

I have heard the calls, as I am sure have other hon. Members, from those who say, "Well, if it is safe, why don't you have it? Prove to us that you have had it." As a 28-year-old with no underlying health conditions that make me more susceptible to a respiratory illness, such as coronavirus, I should not be taking the vaccine from someone who needs it, but if that is what it takes to get people to have it, then I will gladly have it. Sign me up, and I will have the vaccine, with as many cameras there as people want. Ultimately, I want people to listen to the debate and take away this message: please, please, please have the vaccine when the time comes and you are asked to come forward. The right, healthy, patriotic and human thing to do is to be vaccinated to protect individuals and those around them.

I was not the only one moved by the words of those who had the vaccine on the first day. They talked about how they had been separated from their loved ones for so long, and were looking forward to seeing people and doing normal things again. Any number of the people who had the vaccine on the first day would have been poignant to reference, but I cannot sum up today's debate in any better words than those of Mr Kenyon, who was interviewed on the streets of London by the American news organisation CNN:

"There's no point dying now, when I have lived this long, is there?"

6.12 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak on any issue in Westminster Hall, Sir David, but my mailbag has been full of points of view about this issue. I agree with some of those points of view, and have questions about others.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) set the scene exceptionally well. The purpose of the debate is to say that those who are convinced to have the vaccine should do that—I am one of them—and that those who have questions should have those questions answered. That is thrust of where the hon. Gentleman was coming from, and it is exactly what I would wish to see being done. I thank him for setting the scene and bringing forward the debate.

As some hon. Members will know, I lost my mother-in-law to covid about seven weeks ago. The effect of the covid-19 outbreak was particularly relevant to my family. At the time my mother-in-law had covid-19, she had underlying issues, so, unfortunately, when covid-19 struck, her time in this world was always going to be difficult. The doctors thought they might be able to do the plasma test with her, but they quickly realised they could not do that, because her kidneys would be unable to take it. Therefore, it was basically palliative care.

[Jim Shannon]

It was terribly sad, because she was on a ward on her own in the Ulster Hospital and none of us could go and see her. We all wanted to, but we could not. Her daughter—my wife's sister—was in the ward across from her in the intensive care unit, with covid-19 as well, at the same time. She could not even go the distance from where the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington is seated to where I am now to see her mum, because it was not allowed. My wife and my father-in-law were self-isolating. My wife's aunt and uncle both had covid-19 at the same time. My wife's uncle Frank was on oxygen in the ICU of the Ulster Hospital, as was her sister-in-law. They are all better today.

My 11-year-old granddaughter also had it at about the same time. I can never understand how covid-19 can take this person and not that person. At 11 years of age, my granddaughter is very strong and fit and able to combat it. It did not affect her mummy, daddy or sister, who did not have it, so it is sometimes a bit hard to understand. But when I talk about this disease and the e-petition, I have personal knowledge of how it affects families.

Also, I had two very good friends. Norma McBride, a lady who looked after our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association coffee morning every year, had underlying issues and did not last long. Here is a story. Two sisters, one of whom works in my office, came together for a family reunion in February this year. Betty from my office and Norma both drank from the same bottle of water. Norma took covid and died, and Betty did not. One would think that the chances of getting covid after drinking from the same bottle as one's sister, who went on to get covid, would be fairly strong. That would have been my opinion, but Betty did not get it. I also lost a good friend, Billy Allen, one of my constituents. He lived most of his life in England but then came back home to Newtownards, and I knew him quite well.

We have had some difficult times, but I am very aware of the need for a vaccine to combat the virus and to give people the best opportunity to win the battle against covid. I am a type 2 diabetic, unlike the hon. Gentleman who introduced the debate. When it comes to handing out the vaccine, I will probably fit into a priority category, but I want to say this: come to me after everybody else in the priority list has had it, because I do not want to be ahead of anybody else. I want it, I know I need it, and I have no doubts about it whatsoever, but I wish to make sure that we follow the order that the Government and the regional Governments have set out, and at some point it will come to me as a type 2 diabetic. I urge everyone to take the covid-19 vaccine and to be safe.

I am not a medical professional so, in preparation for this debate, I have been in contact with several medical professionals, including a GP, a pharmacist and an intensive care doctor. I raised with them issues that have been highlighted to me, such as concerns about women's fertility, which is an issue when it comes to the Government giving the vaccine to pregnant ladies, for instance. The long-term effects are a concern. The outcome of those discussions have meant that it is likely that I, as a diabetic, will take the vaccine probably between now and the summer, if we go down the priority list of networks.

In the past, vaccines were taken by some because they felt that it was a risk they should take, whereas others were not sure. The eradication of some of the world's diseases, as the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington set out, should be an evidential base for what we should do. Many people, whenever they saw that past vaccines were successful, were convinced that they could take it and not die as a result, so I think there is every merit in making sure that we do that as well, as the hon. Gentleman referred to. It was a salient point and a key issue for this debate.

Queen's University Belfast and other universities across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have formed partnerships to investigate and try to find a cure for diabetes, cancer and heart disease, and also for dementia and Alzheimer's, and for those who have vision problems. If we did not have these pioneering investigations, examinations and medical tests going on across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we would be unable to find the things that are important for the cures that I believe can happen.

I want to put on the record that I think I should have the vaccine, because I want to have it, and I believe it is right to have it. I thank the Minister—I have said this in the Chamber and now say it here—for all the hard work that he and his team have done. We owe him a debt for his leadership through this difficult time, because things were so uncertain back in February and March, when we did not know the answers, because we were all learning as we went along. What joy it brought me and many others across this great nation when it was announced that a vaccine had been found.

Vaccinations should be strongly encouraged, and I encourage people to take up their flu jab, the measles, mumps and rubella vaccination and others, and to take this covid-19 vaccine when it comes as well. However, it must be a matter of personal choice, and I in no way support punishing those who do not choose to take this vaccine, ever mindful that I want them to take it. I wish that they would, and I hope that we can convince them. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington set the scene in his excellent contribution. It is our job to convince, and I look to the Minister for that purpose. How can we convince others who may be unsure or doubtful as to the best way? The debate centres around the fact that there must be an element of choice, and while the Government have said that vaccination will not be mandated at present, responses such as "the Government will carefully consider all options to improve vaccination rates, should that be necessary"

may pose a question in the minds of some people about whether they will be made to take it. I do not think that they will be, but I will listen to the arguments.

When I was much younger, as a councillor in a previous life, I had a fairly black-and-white opinion of things. Over the past 30 years of married life, my opinions have changed greatly and I see things in a much wider and more general way than in the past, which I believe allows me to be persuaded by those who have an evidential base and who can persuade me that something is right and that I should do it. That is what I am asking the Government to do. Many people need their concerns addressed and fears dispelled, and I believe this debate is the time to ensure that one option is not enforced vaccination, or a penalty for not being vaccinated, or even a curtailment of activity. Again, it is a point of persuasion. While I am aware that other nations may

consider immunity passports alongside vaccination, it is my fervent belief that we must not penalise people who remain unconvinced.

Those who have questions should have them answered. I am awaiting answers to questions I asked of SAGE—asked through the Prime Minister’s office, by the way—regarding constituents’ concerns. That is what we do: we ask questions on behalf of constituents. When I get those answers, as I know I will, I will be happy to pass them on. Many of my acquaintances are happy to take the vaccine, but some wish not to, or they wish to wait—that might be a better way of putting it. Medical professionals and others advise caution, and like much of the coronavirus pandemic, both sides, whatever they may be, should be understood as valid.

I also express my concern over some of those on the internet and social media who promote the opinion—I will be careful how I put this—that the vaccine could be harmful and would be detrimental to health and wellbeing. I gently suggest that we need to listen to the scientists who have the evidence and the knowledge and who can deliver the convincing evidence necessary for people to understand that there should not be a fear. I caution the internet and social media users against the drive that there seems to be to do that.

I understand that there must be a decent uptake for this vaccine to be effective, but I also understand that those who have questions must have the opportunity to discuss it, and that that discussion must be with our medical professionals, many of whom feel ill-informed at this stage to recommend the vaccine. Reliable information and all the necessary evidence must be made public, so that everyone can weigh up the risks and benefits for themselves. That freedom must be the cornerstone of any discussion of the vaccine.

Let me be clear that I will take the vaccine when my time comes. I am not good with needles, but I do take my vaccines—I take the flu jab, and a while ago I had a tetanus injection after cutting my hand. Those are things I had to do. I trust those with whom I have spoken who know more than I do, but I uphold the right of those who are uncertain at this time to hold back. That is freedom.

I have heard the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) talk about freedom many times in a genuine way. I hope that we will not be too far apart in what we say in our speeches. I understand the point that he has made. In this House we must protect our people. I want to protect my constituents. I want to ensure that they are safe. I believe that they need the vaccine in order to be safe, but on behalf of those who have signed the e-petition, I believe we have a job to do. Sir David, I have gone on too long.

6.26 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I thank the 589 Wycombe constituents who signed the petition.

I want to make three points. First, vaccines are a good thing. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington made a passionate case for a vaccine. I only wish to add to it something said by the deputy chief medical officer, Professor Van-Tam:

“If we can get through phase one”—

of the priority list—

“and it is a highly effective vaccine and there is very, very high up take, then we could in theory take out 99% of hospitalisations and deaths related to Covid 19.”

That is his estimate. That is a tremendous thing, which reinforces the case that my hon. Friend made. I am 49 years of age, so I do not think I will be offered the vaccine any time soon, but I will certainly have a safe and effective vaccine when it is my turn, and I encourage others to do so. However, I will not gainsay those people who wish to refuse a medicine.

That brings me to my second point. Whatever we may think of other people’s opinions, we cross an ethical boundary if we compel people to take a medicine. It is clear from what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said that there is no question of the Government compelling people to take a vaccine for this disease, and quite right, too. It is worth remembering that although the infection fatality rate for this disease is considerably worse than flu—I understand it is between 0.5% and 1%, and considerably worse for those vulnerable to it—it is not comparable to, for example, the haemorrhagic fevers. We are not talking about a 10% infection fatality rate. I dare say, if we were up at an 80% infection fatality rate, we would all support authoritarian measures without too much of a second thought, because such a serious disease would threaten our civilisation. This disease, dreadful as it is, has an infection fatality rate of about 1% overall, so there can be no question of coercing people directly to take the vaccine.

That brings me to the text of the petition, which states:

“I want the Government to prevent any restrictions being placed on those who refuse to have any potential Covid-19 vaccine.”

That goes a little further. That is not about stopping the Government from compelling people to take it; it is about ensuring that those people who, for whatever reason, do not wish to take the vaccine, do not lose their liberties as a consequence. I understand from people better versed in medical ethics that this is known as implicit coercion.

One can imagine a circumstance in which, for example, an airline chose to say to people, “You may not fly until you have had a vaccine.” A restaurant might say, “You cannot come in until you have had the vaccine.” On and on it would go, until reaching a point where unless people have had the vaccine, they cannot live what most of us would consider a normal life, going to restaurants, shops or whatever it may be. To me, that would be totally unacceptable.

Before moving on to why that would be unacceptable, I have to say that it would also be ineffective. There is a difference between a vaccine stopping someone from getting a disease and being killed by it and a vaccine that stops someone shedding the disease on to others. The harm principle in the philosophy of freedom is about constraining people’s liberties so that they do not harm others. That means there is a profound practical difference between the purpose of a vaccine being to stop people getting sick and the purpose of a vaccine being to stop people shedding the virus. At the moment, a number of businesses that are looking at restricting their customers to those who have been vaccinated have not understood that, actually, we do not yet know whether the vaccine will stop people shedding the disease.

[Mr Steve Baker]

I turn to something that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said in relation to the Pfizer vaccine. When asked how many people will need to be vaccinated before life can return to normal, he said:

“The answer to that is we just do not know. So the trials can tell you if a vaccine is clinically safe and if it’s effective at protecting an individual from the disease. What we can’ know, until we’ve vaccinated a significant proportion of the population, is how much it stops the transmission of the disease.”

That is my first point. I would say to businesses large and small, “Please don’t start seeking to restrict your customers’ ability to come and do business with you because they haven’t had the vaccine.” That is not an effective strategy, and the Secretary of State has explained why.

I want to come to what I think is the moral case. Some people argue that property rights should be so strong that property owners should be allowed to serve whoever they wish, but that is not the approach we take in an enlightened and modern civilised society. I am afraid the argument touches on some very difficult issues. For example, we do not allow people to say that they will not have same-sex couples in their bed and breakfast. We will not allow discrimination against the range of protected characteristics.

I can see that Ministers might face a temptation to say, “Let’s allow the acceleration of the roll-out of the vaccine by turning a blind eye to property owners insisting on people being vaccinated before staying in their bed and breakfast, or whatever it might be.” I can see that some Ministers might argue, on the basis of property rights, that shop owners, hotel owners and so on ought to have the choice—I understand the argument, because I am a classical liberal and I think about property rights—but I have to say to the Minister, who I am sure understands the argument, that we cross a Rubicon if we say that it is possible to discriminate against people on the basis of their health status. That would be a very sad and wrong basis on which to go forward as a country, even though I can understand that in the face of this disease, with all that that implies, there is pressure on Ministers, officials, members of the public and businesses—we all know what the costs are. It would be very easy to make an ethical mistake, which we could regret for a very long time.

For those two reasons—because it is not an effective thing to do, and because it is morally wrong to discriminate against people on the basis of their choice not to take a vaccine—I will stand with the petitioners in asking the Government to prevent any restrictions being placed on people who refuse to have any potential covid-19 vaccine. Of course it is a very serious disease, and of course we should all take the vaccine. I absolutely stand with my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington and the hon. Member for Strangford, who support vaccination. I will not give the least succour to the anti-vaxxers, but I say to the Minister that people have all sorts of strange beliefs in this world. If people do not want to take a vaccine, please let us not turn a blind eye to any kind of discrimination against them.

6.33 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am very pleased to participate in this debate about the covid vaccine, and I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for his comprehensive exposition of the matter before us.

We can all agree that it is simply not the case that either the UK Government or the Scottish Government have any plans to mandate the covid vaccine and make it compulsory. Indeed, the Scottish Government—and, I believe, the UK Government—have explicitly said that they will not utilise coercive measures to ensure compliance and increase vaccination rates. Before I go any further, I would like to say—I believe it has already been said—that we are in a very fortunate position to be able even to discuss and debate the roll-out of a vaccine. What a marvel! Six months ago, we would have been delighted to be in this position. Finally, we can see an end to the terrible damage and restrictions that this deadly virus has placed on all our lives. Too often, it has cost lives. Every Government, in the face of a pandemic or any threat to public safety or disease, must have the safety of their people at the forefront. That must be the overriding and principal concern. The public who, on the whole, have been extremely compliant with the restrictions, will overwhelmingly and collectively be breathing a sigh of relief that we now have a vaccine that will help to end—or begin to end—these terrible days. It will not just allow us to resume some kind of normality, but save lives, particularly of older people who are vulnerable to this terrible disease.

I will not be philosophical, because it is my personal view—perhaps I am an eternal optimist—that judging from the high levels of public compliance with the public health measures, which we have all found difficult, the take-up of the vaccine will be very high. Of course, individuals can choose to refuse it, but I honestly believe that the overwhelming majority will have it, just as the overwhelming majority of those eligible take advantage of the flu vaccine, and just as parents ensure that the vaccines to protect their children against rotavirus, diphtheria, hepatitis B, haemophilus influenzae, polio, tetanus and whooping cough are taken up.

Such vaccinations are given to children; in fact, that is the list of vaccinations given to children in the first 16 weeks of their life when they are at their most vulnerable. Without those vaccines, babies would be less safe and less protected from nasty, and potentially fatal, diseases. That is why parents take their children along to the local GP to have those vaccines administered. As always with vaccines, there may be a few uncomfortable side effects for a very small number of children or of any group receiving the vaccine. That is not new. The protection given to children, however, and those who receive vaccines against serious diseases far outweighs any discomfort that may subsequently be felt; and so it is for the very small number likely to have minor discomfort after the administration of the covid vaccine.

Although I appreciate that more tests are required to perfect a covid vaccine for children, because such vaccines are always tested on adults first, between the ages of one and 16 years old, five more vaccines may be administered to children. Older people may be offered several other vaccines from the age of 65 years. There is even a shingles vaccine. When pregnant, women are offered the whooping cough vaccine. Vaccines are entwined and embedded in various stages of our lives, and all of them are perfectly safe. There is a range of vaccines that are a normal part of our lives and which we accept readily, because we know that they are important for our health and wellbeing.

I read that 70% of the population needs to be vaccinated with the covid vaccine before we can return to normality, although I take on board the point made by the hon. Member for Winchester about that. Regardless, I hope that take-up will be higher than 70% by the time the roll-out is complete.

Regarding ongoing restrictions for those who may choose not to take up the vaccine, as far as I am aware, only Qantas airlines has said that it will not carry passengers who cannot prove that they have been vaccinated. We do not know yet if that is a knee-jerk reaction, if Qantas will be a lone voice, or if individual businesses will seek to impose conditions on the public to access their services while the vaccine is rolled out. We shall see, but I honestly doubt that that will happen. It certainly seems unlikely that businesses will be able to legally insist that those whom they employ must be vaccinated.

A word of caution: nobody denies that people have the right to refuse the vaccine, but insurance companies will surely levy higher premiums for life and travel insurance for those who do not take up the vaccine, because they operate on the basis of risk. They make all sorts of decisions about the level of our premiums based on that information, so that is something to consider.

Mr Baker: My constituency is Wycombe, by the way. I agree with the hon. Lady on this point. If people make a choice about their own person that increases their own personal risk and then ask somebody to insure them for it, it is completely reasonable to charge a higher premium. But I will just say this to her, if I may, on the Qantas point. I agree with her that it is just Qantas so far, but people are afraid out there. Actually, I want the take-up of this vaccine to be as high as possible, so does she agree with me that we in this place, in order to provide leadership on a cross-party basis, need to appeal to business owners and others to be reasonable about what they do?

Patricia Gibson: Yes, I agree. The reason why I have talked about Qantas is that I do think that it is a knee-jerk reaction. People are afraid. I think that, as the vaccine is rolled out, as there is more information and as they see that more and more people are taking up the vaccine with no ill effects, the concerns that both business and the general public might have will all start to dissipate. Perhaps I am just the eternal optimist, but I genuinely believe that that will happen, because vaccinations are not new.

What I have heard from constituents and what I have read is that the overwhelming majority of people want to stop having to worry about this virus. They want an end to the restrictions that we face as soon as that is safely possible. They want a vaccine to help put this dark time behind us, and they want these things to be delivered as soon as that is possible.

Many have contacted me—I am sure that I am not alone in the Chamber in saying this—to ask whether, in the roll-out of the vaccine, we could include, as a priority, those who are living with a terminal condition, which makes their vulnerability to the virus very concerning. I share the view that those who are living with a terminal condition ought to be prioritised for receiving the vaccine. I throw that in, because it is important at this point, when we are talking about concerns about

the vaccine, to say that there are also concerns about groups who feel they may be excluded from being prioritised, which is very important.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady has outlined a concern on behalf of those who have terminal illnesses. The families want to enjoy that bit of time with their loved one as well. We can never ignore their feelings and input into this, either.

Patricia Gibson: Yes. I would expect and hope that anybody whose immune system was compromised would be prioritised in the roll-out. That is important, because those people have to be able to enjoy whatever time they have.

There is a minority—I believe it is a minority—of people who are concerned about the vaccine's safety and/or efficacy. As we have heard, there is a job to do in convincing them that the vaccine is safe—that the vaccine is the work of top scientists and experts in the field and is as safe as the vaccinations that they have had and that have been administered, with their consent, to their own children when they were but babes in arms. Yes, we have a vaccine for covid-19 that has been delivered at breathtaking speed in scientific terms. However, that should not be a cause for concern or alarm; it should be a cause of pride. It should be the cause of a great sense of achievement that wonderful scientists and dedicated teams have worked flat-out to deliver this vaccine, and have rigorously tested it by undertaking mass trials with thousands of human volunteers to ensure that the vaccine is safe and effective.

The higher prevalence of covid-19 in the population, compared with other viruses against which vaccines have been developed, has led to a much faster rate of infection in respect of test/control groups, meaning that conclusions about efficiency were faster. In addition, the funding for this vaccine has enabled its rapid development, as there has been no delay due to financial considerations. Add to that the advances in technology to enable the mass manufacturing of huge quantities of the vaccine, alongside a global effort involving almost every scientific research institute, global health organisation and country, bringing together global, state and private power, as opposed to relying on a handful of scientists working for a small number of private companies. If we take all of that into account, we can appreciate how this vaccine has been delivered in record time. That is the message and information that need to be relayed again and again, to allay the fears of those who are concerned about the safety and/or efficacy of the vaccine. However, that may not always be easy, with disinformation and conspiracy theories thriving on the internet. I had no idea there were so many self-styled experts without any medical or scientific expertise expounding their view that the vaccine is not safe, but that is not surprising, given that they are probably the same people who, throughout this entire pandemic, have been perpetuating the myth that the covid-19 virus is some fictional, mythical dark conspiracy. We know that those who expound these bizarre theories are in the minority, but they manage to reach and even convince some people, and they frighten people. As such, the job for every Government and for all of us is to expound the positives of this game-changing vaccine, which will allow us to resume some kind of normality and save lives.

[Patricia Gibson]

The roll-out of this vaccine is a good-news story: in fact, it is the best news story this year, if not this decade. It is a story that should be told with joy, pride and relief. We all have a duty to tell this story in our own way, and I know the Minister will be very keen to share in the telling of that story. Vaccines have protected us from birth to old age, and have saved countless lives. They are nothing short of a medical and scientific wonder, so I hope and believe that as this vaccine is rolled out, we will all be reminded of that fact, and the overwhelming majority of us will avail ourselves of this vaccine, which could save our lives.

6.46 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship in this debate, Sir David. Over 300,000 people have signed the e-petition that we are debating, which shows the strength of feeling on this matter, and I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for his leadership of this debate and for having taken it on on behalf of the Petitions Committee. It was the anniversary of his election to this place a couple of days ago, and he has made a significant impact over that year, although he will forgive me if I do not look back on that date with quite the same level of enthusiasm as he might. However, I thought he made an outstanding case about how detailed the process of a vaccine coming from conception to usage is. I hope those who are listening will have taken that on face-value terms, because it should give us all a lot of comfort.

Similarly, the word that I double-underlined was “marvel”. We should marvel at vaccination, and we should also marvel at the role of Britain in vaccination: whether in 1796, 1996 or 2020, and whether that is brilliant British scientists or enlightened British Governments of all persuasions. The thing I particularly reflect on is Britain’s role in vaccinations around the world, through the Global Vaccine Alliance and through our own bilateral aid arrangements. Hundreds and hundreds of thousands of deaths have been prevented because of our role in the process of vaccinations, and we should take a lot of pride in that. It is a real British success.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—we are a bit warmer than we were in this Chamber together last Thursday—made a poignant contribution, with a reminder about loss. We can sometimes get wrapped up in the figures behind all this, but each one of the people whom we have lost this year is a person with a family and a story. His contribution was also very poignant when it came to the vagaries and variances in all of our experiences, as well as the range of vaccines, a point that was also made by the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). I hope that the 300,000 people who signed this e-petition, or those who choose to listen to this debate, will understand this vaccine as part of all vaccines, rather than anything distinct or different. Although it is the story of the day, it fits very much within the suite of things we think collectively are good for people, and it has gone through all the tests that have been described. I hope, again, that is something people will take comfort from.

I was very pleased to see the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) in this debate. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, I always follow his contributions closely.

Before becoming the shadow public health Minister, I was an Opposition Whip—I do not know what I had done, but I was an Opposition Whip for some time—and the major upside of that role, if there is one, is that Members get to sit in the Chamber and hear from colleagues of all persuasions—ones whose contributions they might not otherwise look out for. They hear about Southend being a city—I have never been there, and the only thing I think about with Southend, Sir David, is you talking about city status.

The hon. Member for Wycombe made what I think was my favourite speech this year, certainly from the Government Benches, on 30 January—I do not remember the date of everyone’s speeches; I have a good memory, but it is not that good. It was the day before we left the European Union, and the hon. Gentleman made a speech in the general debate on global Britain. I have to say, I thought the scheduling of that debate was difficult, because feelings were very strong and running very high. Some people were in Parliament Square celebrating; others were at home, commiserating. The hon. Member made a very important speech about the need for victors to be gracious and for the vanquished to look forward. I think that everybody could take something from that. I am not sure, 11 months on, whether we are quite there yet, but I hope so, and I think that we all, as leaders, have a role to take on.

Mr Baker: I am honoured by the hon. Member’s words, and am very grateful.

Alex Norris: I have not finished yet. The hon. Member concluded his speech that day with lots of references to Ronald Reagan, which sent me down a reading rabbit hole that I have not yet finished. I still cannot get the attraction, but the merits of Reagan are perhaps a debate for another day. However, I thought the hon. Member made a very strong case on both the pragmatic and the moral arguments. I will come back to some of the implied coercion points that he made.

I welcome the Minister to his place. This is certainly the first time I have opposed him. We all enjoyed William Shakespeare being one of the first to get the vaccine, but no one made the Stratford connection to him as Minister. I thought that was a missed opportunity. I will make a few points, and hopefully draw him out on a couple of them. We know that many basic freedoms have been curtailed over the last year, and we all want that to end as soon as possible. We know that there is a strong desire for things to get back to normal, but these significant measures and restrictions on freedom are necessary, and we have seen yet another reminder of that today.

Vaccines are the most effective public health intervention, either in relation to coronavirus or health in general, so the progress that has been made should cheer us. It is therefore important that a significant proportion of people take up the vaccination, especially those with the greatest vulnerabilities. The last time we debated the covid-19 vaccine in this place was just over a month ago. It was the day after the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine had achieved success in phase 3 studies. Similarly, since then both the Moderna candidate and the University of Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine have achieved similar success.

That is a remarkable story in terms of time. We saw wonderful pictures of people receiving their first dose last week, and I understand that this week the vaccination

programme is being extended to GP surgeries. It has been a whirlwind month, and I commend the Government for what they have achieved. It is no small feat, and I know that the Minister will take my attempts to seek clarity in that spirit. I am not seeking to throw rocks at the success, but we want some answers.

I am particularly keen to know the Minister's assessment of the take-up required for the programme to be effective. I submitted a written question on that and received a holding answer, but he might indulge me today. If the Government are not keen to be drawn on what the figure is, which I can understand, perhaps he could explain why they do not think sharing it is helpful. In my head, I would have a totaliser. When we are fixing the community centre roof, and we need to raise money, we colour it in every time we receive another hundred pounds, but that might well not be the right approach, and I would be keen to know why.

The vaccine is one thing; a vaccination programme is another. We have rightly been very critical of the big logistical challenges for the Government both in the roll-out of personal protective equipment and the implementation of test and trace. We cannot afford a situation where vaccines complete the set. I recognise that the early signs have been positive, but I wish to pick up on a couple of bits. We have been made aware of some care-home and hospital staff being at risk of missing out due to requirements of the IT system. Have those loopholes been closed yet? Has that been clarified?

Similarly, GPs have raised concerns with us about the new rules being brought in late in the day, so that vaccinations will take twice as long, as patients need to be observed for 15 minutes. Again, that might be on very good public health grounds, but I am keen to know from the Minister what they are. We know that general practice per designated site has to deliver at least 975 vaccinations over a seven-day period. I did not receive a convincing answer when I raised this last month with my opposite number, the Minister for Prevention, Public Health and Primary Care, but what is the assessed impact on other GP services and how will we ensure that practices can meet their normal case load? I would be very keen to hear those points addressed.

Turning to the substance of what these 300,000 people have asked us to discuss, at the root it is about vaccine hesitancy. It is very easy to talk about the anti-vax elements. I am glad that colleagues have not majored on that, because to an extent that is a straw man. Multiple hon. Members made contributions about just how thin the basis for those conspiracy theories or anti-vax sentiments are. We could spend all day deconstructing them and never lose the argument, but that concerns only a very small proportion of the British people.

We know from polling, and from our constituency mailbags, that those people are a very small group indeed. There is a much more significant and noticeable chunk of people—though far from a majority—who are vaccine-hesitant, and entirely reasonably. Some might simply not want to have it, as the hon. Member for Wycombe said, and we ought to respect that. Others might not want to do so because of safety concerns—something I have heard from lots of constituents. They want to know that any vaccination, be it for covid-19 or anything else, is safe, so we as political leaders have a really important role in giving constituents the confidence

that they seek. That will hopefully come from people observing the debate, and from our public engagements in general.

I know people will be watching this debate. I do not always think that about the debates we have; I suspect my 30-minute Adjournment debates do not pull in the big numbers. My message to people watching is that if they are unconvinced by what we are saying, which is perfectly reasonable, they should ask, ask, ask. If they get a question answered and are still not happy, they should ask the next one. I would certainly say that to my constituents. We will seek to get them information through all the available channels, if that is what it takes for them to feel confident about receiving the vaccine.

I agree with a number of hon. Members that the sentiment of the petition slightly misses where we are at the moment. There is a pretty broad political consensus against compulsion, coercion or inconveniencing people into submission. I know what our position is as the Opposition, but no one studies what the Government say more closely than we do, and I have never detected a desire for mandatory vaccination in what they are saying. We all want to have confidence, and to know that the roll-out has been done through the proper process, rather than in any other way, and like other hon. Members who have spoken, I hope that business will take the same view. The Government might have a role in that, and I would be interested to know the Minister's reflections on the contribution from the hon. Member for Wycombe. I would say gently to businesses that compulsory vaccination will almost certainly not do what they want it to do. It is therefore important to take some time and have a cool head on this issue.

People's unwillingness to take the covid-19 vaccine has a knock-on effect on vaccine hesitancy more generally. In fact, this is probably the FA cup final of vaccine hesitancy. Last year, vaccine hesitancy was in the World Health Organisation's top 10 threats to global health—it was up there with a future pandemic. It is something that we have to address, whether it is related to covid-19 or not. In Denmark in 2013, false claims in a documentary about the human papillomavirus vaccine led to a decline in uptake of around 90% among some cohorts. Similarly, between 2014 and 2017 in Ireland, vocal attacks on the HPV vaccine from the anti-vaccine lobby led to a drop in uptake from 70% to 50%. These things matter.

What we see through those developments, and through our experiences in this country, is that the best method of countering those views is through proactive, positive health-promoting campaigns. I know that is something the Government are doing, and it is very welcome—we will support them in that. It is almost certainly too early to have enough data to be able to talk about the efficiency of such things, but we want the Government to keep pushing hard on this issue. That is what our constituents want us to do—to explain and, as I say, make ourselves available to answer any questions that they have.

We have had an extraordinary year fighting the virus. There is now clearly a path for us to take—a light at the end of the tunnel, or however people want to characterise it. We need to pursue it with the same vigour with which we attacked the previous year. If we do, we might just get out of this thing.

6.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Nadhim Zahawi): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on his leadership of this important debate on e-petition 323442. Over 300,000 people have signed the petition, including 641 in his constituency.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his very moving speech, and I am deeply saddened by the loss of his mother-in-law and the infection of his wife, other family members and friends. As the shadow Minister rightly pointed out, the hon. Member for Strangford brought home that each and every statistic is a person, with a family and people who love them very much.

I will hopefully address the excellent—as always—speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker). I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) both for her excellent speech and for her clear confirmation that neither the Scottish Government nor the United Kingdom Government will mandate vaccination at all. I congratulate her chief medical officer, as well as the chief medical officers in Northern Ireland and Wales, who worked together so that we could all start to vaccinate on the same day, last Tuesday. I am grateful, Sir David, for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Government this evening.

Jim Shannon: We in Northern Ireland were first.

Nadhim Zahawi: I hear the hon. Gentleman; Northern Ireland was first by a few minutes.

Last week was a most important week across the United Kingdom, because we began vaccinating people against covid-19, and that, I hope, has started to turn the tide on this virus. The pandemic has forced the Government and our devolved Administrations to take steps that are truly unprecedented in peacetime. They are steps that no democratic Government would wish to take unless they were absolutely necessary. At each point in the pandemic, every decision we have taken has been with the utmost consideration for its impact on our personal freedoms. As hon. Members have brilliantly highlighted this evening, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe rightly reminded us, the petition that we are debating is a matter of great legal and ethical complexity.

Before I address some of those complexities, I will set out the facts. First, there are currently no plans to place restrictions on those who refuse to have a covid vaccination. As my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington reminded us, we have no plans to introduce so-called vaccine passporting. My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe was slightly nervous about that, quite rightly, as when I did my first interview about the issue—with the BBC, I think—I was asked about some of the technological challenges and I may have mis-spoken. I was grateful to *The Spectator* and TalkRadio, which allowed me to explain myself.

Mandating vaccinations is discriminatory and completely wrong, and, like my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe and others, I urge businesses listening to this debate to not even think about that. I will explain in further detail why that is the wrong thing to do. I put on record my

thanks to Professor Karol Sikora, who has many hundreds of thousands of followers, who quoted me and said I eloquently dealt with the issue. We have absolutely no plans for vaccine passporting.

Secondly, cards that were issued after people got their first covid-19 vaccination have been mentioned on social media. Among other details, they contain the date of their second vaccination. That record does not constitute a so-called vaccine passport. It does mean anyone is immune. As we know, the vaccine is given as two injections, 21 days apart. The second dose is the booster dose. I am sure hon. Members will forgive me for repeating the message that patients must return as instructed for their second dose. Without the second dose, the vaccine will not be effective. That is a really important message, and I am grateful to all hon. Members who are repeating that to their constituents.

Thirdly, on completion of both vaccinations, patients will be issued with a vaccine record card, much as they are for other vaccination programmes, so there is nothing different in the way we are dealing with this vaccine. Again, that does not constitute a so-called vaccine passport; nor can it be used as a form of identification. That would be absolutely wrong. Colleagues will appreciate that the careful and accurate recording of vaccination status is an important part of a public health effort. It supports patient safety during probably the largest and most challenging vaccination programme in British history.

Fourthly, in addressing the many who signed the petition, I want to underline one key fact, which we have heard over and over again from hon. Members: vaccines work. It is really important that we send that message from this place. After clean water, they are the single greatest public health tool in the history of mankind. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington reminded us of Edward Jenner. It fills me with great joy that the Jenner Institute was one of the first to stand up and say, “We can do this.” I hope that, after a rigorous study by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine will be in place as soon as approval comes through. Obviously it is up to the regulator to deliver that.

Vaccines, as we have heard, have ended untold suffering for millions, if not billions, of people around the world. When our turn comes and our GP gets in touch, we all have a duty to heed that call. It is how we will be able to protect ourselves and the people around us—our friends and family, the people we love. Months of trials, involving thousands of people, have shown that the vaccines we are using are effective. They work. In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington, they have been tested on between 15,000 and 50,000 people. There were no shortcuts or quick fixes by the MHRA; it has followed exactly the same process as usual. The difference is that instead of waiting for phase 1 to finish before doing phase 2, and then phase 3, the studies were in parallel; hence we were able to develop the vaccines rapidly.

Fifthly, and equally importantly, each covid vaccine will be authorised only, as I have said, once it has met robust standards of effectiveness, safety and quality. As we have heard, vaccines authorised by our independent regulator, the MHRA, will be assessed for clinical safety and effectiveness through a robust review. The vaccine is free to everyone eligible across the UK. There is really no excuse for someone not to take it when their turn comes.

Sixthly, although we know the vaccine protects individuals, we do not yet know its precise impact on onward transmission. My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe made that point brilliantly himself, and by quoting the Secretary of State. In answer to the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), we will not know where the point is that he mentioned until we scale up the vaccinations. We will continue to monitor the impact on transmission through the Test and Trace system. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe said, we do know that the vaccine protects people, which is the important thing. That is why I encourage everyone to read, read and read again—or to ask, ask and ask again, to quote the hon. Member for Nottingham North.

The full impact on infection rates will not become clear until we get to those large numbers, so we are monitoring that carefully. Hon. Members will understand that without our knowing that, it would be irresponsible for anyone to declare that they are immune. The Qantas question is therefore completely wrong, because it is impossible for anyone to say that. The science does not yet support that conclusion. Even if people are vaccinated, they must continue to follow the rules where they are, and keep taking the common-sense steps that are now so familiar to us—washing our hands, covering our face and making space.

Hon. Members have raised many questions about the World Health Organisation and the required international response. The United Kingdom Government have led the way. We could do even more. Next year, the UK will take up the presidency of the G7, as the hon. Member for Nottingham North mentioned; we will need to deal with anti-vaxxers nationally and internationally. We look forward to working with many nations on that challenge.

I will turn to some of the hon. Gentleman's other questions. On GPs and the additional 15 minutes, that was the further guidance from the MHRA after two cases in which people with a history of severe allergies had an allergic reaction to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. That is why there was a change to the process. On the roll-out today to primary care networks and the question about caseloads, it is brilliant that GPs have come together with primary care networks. For example, in an area of 50,000 people and five practices, they have come together and agreed that one would lead on the vaccination while the other four continued to support the community and deal with caseloads. On his question about care home staff who continue to be prioritised, I am happy to take that offline with him if he has a particular case or details.

The petition that we have debated is of profound importance. I urge anyone who is considering refusing a covid-19 vaccination to ask and ask again. Not only is the vaccine effective and proven to be clinically safe, but the quicker we are able to vaccinate people, the quicker we can bring forward the date when we can begin to

lift the oppressive restrictions that were put in place with a truly heavy heart. I came from a world of entrepreneurialism, of unleashing people's ingenuity, energy and passion. I did not enter politics to restrict people's freedoms, which I profoundly believe in. In the meantime, we all have our part to play. We must continue to respect the rules to ensure that the efforts succeed and can be our shared success, so that we can all have a more joyous 2021. If I do my job properly, we will all be back in this Chamber celebrating, I hope, without the restrictions that we have today.

7.11 pm

Elliot Colburn: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for taking part in this e-petitions debate. The shadow Public Health Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), is right: people are watching. For Members who are interested, Petitions Committee debates attract higher ratings on average than even Prime Minister's questions, so it is worth taking part.

To reiterate the main points that we have covered in today's debate, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke of the privileged position that we are in today to be talking about a vaccine, and I could not agree more. It is excellent news at the end of an incredibly difficult year. The shadow Public Health Minister spoke about the pride that we should take in the UK's history and involvement in vaccines, beginning with Edward Jenner in 1796, and going right up to now, with our contribution to Gavi.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for reminding us of the very human cost of the virus. The shadow Minister and the Minister are right: behind every statistic there is a real person and a real family torn apart by the virus. We must remember that as we make decisions on how best to tackle it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) put the case for the petitioners very well indeed. We do not want, and will not see, as the Minister has confirmed, restrictions put in place, certainly not mandated by the UK Government—or indeed the Scottish Government, as the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran has confirmed. I hope that businesses and other organisations are watching and hearing that message. To repeat what we have all said, I urge everyone to get the vaccine when their time comes. They should ask questions if they have concerns, and should listen to the people who have the knowledge. Let us beat this thing and get back to normal.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 323442, relating to vaccination for Covid-19.

7.13 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 14 December 2020

TREASURY

Operations of the UK's Counter-Terrorist Asset Freezing Regime: 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 (TAF 2010), the Treasury is required to prepare a quarterly report regarding its exercise of the powers conferred on it by Part 1 of TAF 2010. This written statement satisfies that requirement for the period 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020.

This report also covers the UK's implementation of the UN's ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaeda asset freezing regime (ISIL-AQ), and the operation of the EU's asset freezing regime under EU Regulation (EC) 2580/2001 concerning external terrorist threats to the EU—also referred to as the CP 931 regime.

Under the ISIL-AQ asset freezing regime, the UN has responsibility for designations and the Treasury, through the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI), has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaeda (Asset-Freezing) Regulations 2011.

Under EU Regulation 2580/2001, the EU has responsibility for designations and OFSI has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under Part 1 of TAF 2010.

EU Regulation (2016/1686) was implemented on 22 September 2016. This permits the EU to make autonomous Al-Qaeda and ISIL (Da'esh) listings.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-12-14/HCWS645/>.

[HCWS645]

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy White Paper

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): Today the Government have published the energy White Paper which sets out the strategic vision for how we will transform our energy system to build a cleaner, greener future for our country, people and planet.

Building on the Prime Minister's 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, this White Paper provides further clarity on the practical actions that will shift our energy system from one reliant on fossil fuels to one that makes us a world leader in clean energy. We will do this in a way that creates jobs, as we build back greener from covid-19. And we will protect the most vulnerable in society by keeping bills affordable as we transition to net zero.

Consumers

We want to create a fair deal for consumers, protecting the vulnerable and fuel poor with support of £6.7 billion; increasing competition to drive better products and services, saving money on bills; and giving us warmer, more comfortable homes to live in.

The White Paper sets out a raft of measures to help households to save money on their bills. We will support the lowest paid through a package of measures that could save families in old inefficient homes up to £400. This includes extending the warm home discount scheme to 2026 to cover an extra 750,000 households and giving eligible households £150 off their electricity bills each winter. This is on top of the £2 billion green homes grant announced by the Chancellor, extended by a further year in the 10-point plan.

We will also keep bills affordable by making the energy retail market truly competitive. This will include offering people a simple method of switching to a cheaper energy tariff and testing automatically switching consumers to fairer deals to tackle "loyalty penalties".

Putting consumers at the forefront of our approach means not just deploying measures that save energy, but making markets efficient, incentivising energy companies and consumers to choose clean energy, and making sure the rules that govern the market are swift to adapt to new technologies. We will make sure our energy system and networks are fit for the low-carbon transition by consulting on new strategic guidance for Ofgem, legislating for competition in onshore networks and delivering greater co-ordination of offshore networks. We will also encourage the development and uptake of innovative tariffs and products, and ensure customers have more transparent and accurate information on carbon content when they are choosing their energy services and products.

Creating jobs and growth

The energy White Paper comes at a vital time of rebuilding. It reinforces commitments made in the 10-point Plan to support a green recovery from covid-19 through investments in new infrastructure, and technology that will grow the economy, supporting many thousands of jobs and creating new business opportunities at home and abroad.

We estimate that measures in this White Paper could support up to 220,000 jobs in energy by 2030, many in clean industries such as carbon capture usage and storage, offshore wind and electric vehicles. Many of these jobs will be created in our industrial heartlands, supporting our promise to level up the whole country and leave no one behind.

Clean energy transformation

We will transform our energy system from one that is 80% based on fossil fuels today to one that is consistent with net zero. This will see us changing how we heat our homes and travel. It will lead to a doubling in how much electricity we use and the emergence of a new hydrogen economy.

The White Paper reaffirms our commitment to 40GW offshore wind, including 1GW floating wind, by 2030, and sets out £160 million of support for offshore wind integrated manufacturing hubs. This will support our world-leading offshore wind sector in delivering 60% UK content, and up to 60,000 jobs by 2030.

We have also committed to work with industry to aim for 5GW of hydrogen by 2030 which will unlock £4 billion in investment and support up to 8,000 jobs, and will develop low-carbon industrial clusters by 2030 by putting in place the framework required to mobilise investment.

Low-carbon electricity will be a key enabler of our transition to a net zero economy with demand expected to double due to transport and low-carbon heat. Our trajectory will see us have overwhelmingly decarbonised power in the 2030s, and fully decarbonised electricity generation by 2050.

New nuclear power

The White Paper is clear that nuclear power will continue to be an important and proven source of reliable clean electricity. With existing nuclear power plants due to cease generation by the end of the next decade, we need to take action to secure our future energy sources. Therefore, the Government are today confirming that we are entering negotiations with EDF, in relation to the Sizewell C project in Suffolk. EDF has proposed two reactors at the site, based on the design of Hinkley Point C, with a combined capacity of around 3.2 gigawatts of low-carbon electricity. By replicating Hinkley Point C, EDF believes it could be built more cheaply.

No decision has yet been taken to proceed, and the successful conclusion of these negotiations will of course be subject to full Government, regulatory and other approvals, including value for money. I will keep the House informed as we progress our discussions with EDF. And if we do reach a successful outcome, this would lead to tens of billions of pounds of investment into the UK and thousands of jobs during construction.

Today the Government are also publishing responses to the consultation on the regulated asset base (RAB) funding model, which involves an economic regulator granting a licence to a company to charge a regulated price to users of the infrastructure. The funding model is based on private investment and is used in many significant infrastructure projects. Such a model could help secure private investment and cost consumers less in the long run. Following the consultation, the Government will continue to explore a range of financing options with developers, including the RAB model. In particular, we will also continue to consider the potential role of Government finance during construction, provided there is clear value for money for consumers and taxpayers.

UK emissions trading scheme

To support businesses to decarbonise, the Government are today confirming a new and ambitious UK emissions trading scheme (UK ETS) will be in place from 1 January 2021. This new UK carbon market will be the foundation on which the UK achieves net zero emissions cost-effectively.

The scheme has been designed by the UK Government jointly with the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive and is a crucial step towards net zero, and will bring benefits for business, trade, and innovation.

The UK ETS will replace the UK's participation in the EU emissions trading system (EU ETS) and will be a market-based measure which will provide continuity for participants. The UK ETS will initially apply to power stations, energy-intensive industries, and aviation.

Our UK ETS is more ambitious than the EU system it replaces—from day one the cap on emissions allowed within the scheme will be reduced by 5%, and we will consult in due course on aligning it with net zero.

The UK ETS will also allow us to expand carbon pricing across the economy and encourage innovation in emerging decarbonisation technologies. We have committed to exploring expanding the UK ETS to the two thirds of uncovered emissions, and will set out our aspirations to continue to lead the world on carbon pricing in the run-up to COP26. This will also include how the UK ETS could incentivise the deployment of greenhouse gas removal technologies. In addition to this, the UK is open to linking the UK ETS internationally in principle and we are considering a range of options, but no decision on our preferred linking partners has yet been made.

As we move out of the shadow of coronavirus, this energy White Paper opens the door to exciting new opportunities for our country, creating new jobs as we build the economy of tomorrow. Taking action now ensures the UK is set on the path to ending its contribution to climate change while enabling UK industry to seize new opportunities.

[HCWS642]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime: Designations

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): On 10 December, I imposed asset freezes and travel bans on 11 individuals and an asset freeze on one entity under the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020.

This was the third set of designations under this regime since the regulations were laid in July 2020. Criteria for designation under the regime include involvement in violations of the right to life, the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and the right to be free from slavery. These designations address serious violations of human rights in Venezuela, Chechnya, Pakistan and Gambia, including extra-judicial killings and torture.

In Venezuela, the sanctions target figures in the Maduro regime who are responsible for killing and torturing protestors, especially during the period from 2016 to 2017. The designation of senior officials in Chechnya holds to account those responsible for the campaign of persecution of Chechnya's LGBT community which has included extrajudicial executions and torture. In Gambia, the designations include former president Yahya Jammeh, who was responsible for extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, kidnappings, torture; and rape during his tenure as president between 1994 and 2016. We have designated one former senior member of the Pakistani police for his involvement in a series of extrajudicial killings.

The full list of designations is below:

Venezuela

1. Rafael Bastardo: Commander of FAES (Special Action Forces) until 2019;

2. Remigio Ceballos Ichaso: Head of the Strategic Command Operations of the Bolivarian national armed forces (CEOFANB);

3. Fabio Zavarse Pabon: Commander of the National Guard (GNB).

Russian Federation

4. Magomed Daudov: The spokesperson/chairperson of the parliament of the Chechen Republic;

5. Aiub Kataev: Head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation in Argun;

6. Aпти Alaudinov: Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of the Chechen Republic and Major General of the Police;

7. Terek Special Rapid Response Unit.

The Gambia

8. Yahya Abdul Aziz Jemus Junkung Jammeh: former president of the Gambia;

9. Yankuba Badjie: former director general of the Gambian National Intelligence Agency (NIA);

10. Zineb Jammeh: former first lady of the Gambia and wife of Yahya Jammeh.

Pakistan

11. Anwar Ahmad Khan: former senior superintendent of police (SSP) in Malir district, Karachi.

[HCWS640]

Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton):

Between Monday 23 and Thursday 26 November, 2020 I chaired, with Baroness Sugg, the eighth UK-Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council. The meeting was held virtually and was attended by OT leaders and elected representatives from Anguilla, Ascension Island, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, Pitcairn, St Helena, the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, Tristan da Cunha and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The themes of discussion at this year's Council included the impacts of the covid-19 global health pandemic; the constitutional relationship; economic resilience; the UK's exit from the European Union; trade; border security; prisons; protecting the vulnerable (including mental health, domestic violence and children); the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) Instruments Implementation (III) code; environmental protection and COP26.

The Prime Minister addressed the Council. Other ministerial colleagues attending discussions included the right hon. Lord Goldsmith (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, my right hon. Friends the Minister for Security, the Minister for the Armed Forces, the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health and the Under-Secretary of State for Transport.

Members of the Council set out a number of important commitments and areas for joint work in the year ahead.

We discussed the impacts of the covid-19 global pandemic, where the territories expressed their thanks to the UK for its support. We also discussed the constitutional relationship and held discussions on economic resilience, trade and the UK's departure from the EU, where we confirmed our commitment to supporting the overseas territories in building successful and resilient economies and to taking the needs of the territories into account when negotiating new trading relationships and when considering new funding programmes.

We discussed how we could better support vulnerable groups in the overseas territories, committing to strengthen mental health systems, to identify opportunities and take measures to tackle domestic abuse, and to explore whether a children's commissioner role or similar might be appropriate for each territory.

We recognised the importance of the biodiversity of the territories and agreed to work together on ambitious action to tackle climate change at COP26 and agreed to work together on compliance with international maritime conventions.

We also set out programmes of work to support border security and prisons in the territories.

We agreed a joint communique which was issued following the conclusion of the conference and was published on the gov.uk website.

The communique and an associated press statement reflect the commitment of the Governments of the overseas territories and of the UK to continue to work in partnership to achieve the vision set out in the June 2012 White Paper: *The Overseas Territories: Security, Success and Sustainability*.

In line with our commitment in the White Paper, we will continue to report to Parliament on progress by Government Departments.

[HCWS641]

Overseas Territories: Publicly Accessible Registers of Company Beneficial Ownership

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton):

On 15 July 2020 a written ministerial statement [HLWS361/HCWS369] welcomed the statements from eight overseas territories committing to introduce publicly accessible registers of company beneficial ownership. In a welcome step forward, the British Virgin Islands' Government have also committed to adopt publicly accessible registers, meaning that all on the United Kingdom's inhabited territories are committed to adopt such registers. This is a major change, and the unanimous action from all the overseas territories demonstrates their commitment to tackle flows of illicit finance.

As the next step in the process, the Government are publishing a draft Order in Council, which has been prepared in accordance with section 51 of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. The draft order sets out the Government's expectations of how the territories will adopt publicly accessible registers. The draft order has been published on gov.uk with a short accompanying note.

The draft order sets minimum requirements for what the UK Government deem to be a compliant publicly accessible register of company beneficial ownership in

the overseas territories. This includes the form that the register must take and the information that must be made available such that it would be broadly equivalent to that available in accordance with the provisions of part 21 A of the UK Companies Act 2006.

The draft order sets out a minimum definition of beneficial ownership. This encompasses both direct and indirect control over companies and includes, but is not limited to, control through shareholdings, voting rights or the right to appoint or remove a majority of directors. Where a territory attaches a percentage to the type of control the draft order sets out that this cannot be higher than 25%.

The information on an individual must include their name, country of residence, nationality, month and year of birth and the nature of their control over the company.

It is the Government's view that only those territories with companies registered in their jurisdiction need to produce registers, and that territories' registers should be a proportionate reflection of the number of companies registered in their jurisdiction.

By introducing publicly accessible registers of beneficial ownership, the overseas territories are showing that they are responsible jurisdictions and a collaborative partner to the UK. This builds on the exchange of notes arrangements which sees the territories with financial centres share invaluable company beneficial ownership information with UK law enforcement agencies at short notice. A statutory review of these arrangements last year found that they are working well and are providing our law enforcement with invaluable information to support ongoing investigations.

In the light of the firm commitments from all of the inhabited overseas territories to adopt publicly accessible registers, the UK Government have decided that it is now not necessary to make the order under section 51, but will keep this under review.

The UK Government are spearheading an international campaign to encourage more countries to commit to publicly accessible registers by 2023. The UK will continue to work with all territories to support their implementation of publicly accessible registers of beneficial ownership by the end of 2023.

I am sure that members of the House will welcome the publication of this draft Order in Council.

[HCWS643]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Blood Donation

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I would like to inform the House that the Government, along with the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Government, will be updating the blood donor selection criteria. This move will enable men who have sex with men in a long-term relationship to give blood from summer 2021.

In 2011, the lifetime ban on blood donation by men who have sex with men was lifted following an evidence-based review by the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO). This introduced a deferral period of 12 months for men who have sex with men since their last sexual contact with another man.

In 2017, the UK reduced this period to three months. These changes did not impact the safety of the blood supply in the UK.

Since then, the Government have taken steps to explore if further changes can be made to the deferral period for men who have sex with men, without risking the safety of the blood supply. At the request of the Department of Health and Social Care, the 'For Assessment of Individualised Risk' (FAIR) steering group was established at the beginning of 2019. The group reviewed whether the UK Blood Services could move to a more individualised blood donor selection policy.

The steering group reported to SaBTO in October 2020, advising that a more individualised risk-based approach to the blood donor selection policy could be taken without risking the safety of the blood supply. SaBTO reviewed the report and formally recommended that the Government implement the changes proposed by the FAIR steering group.

The Government have accepted this recommendation. This will mean a change to the current three-month deferral period for all men who have sex with men to a gender-neutral selection policy, where deferrals are based on higher-risk behaviours associated with acquiring infections.

This policy change will mean that anyone who has had the same sexual partner in the last three months will be eligible to donate and men who have sex with men will no longer be asked to declare if they have had sex with another man, making the criteria for blood donation gender-neutral and more inclusive.

This is a progressive and welcome step forward, reducing limitations for men who have sex with men to donate blood and creating a fairer system for blood donation. In implementing these changes, the UK will take on a world-leading role as one of the first countries to recognise that a risk-based approach for men who have sex with men does not pose a safety risk to blood donation.

The Department of Health and Social Care is working with NHS Blood and Transplant and devolved administrations to implement changes which we anticipate will be rolled out by summer 2021. We will have monitoring mechanisms in place to ensure the safety of donors and patients, including continued monitoring of both acute and chronic infections in new and regular donors. The changes will be reviewed in 12 months.

The report from the FAIR steering group can be viewed here at: <https://www.blood.co.uk/news-and-campaigns/news-and-statements/fair-steering-group>.

[HCWS646]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping: Substance Misuse Support

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Kelly Tolhurst): At spring Budget 2020, the Chancellor announced funding for substance misuse treatment and recovery services for vulnerable people sleeping rough in England. Today, I am announcing the allocations of this year's funding, totalling £23 million across 43 priority areas in England with the highest level of need, in addition to three

pan-London projects. I am also announcing that this funding will be backed by a further £52 million next year, enabling these individuals to continue to access specialist support.

We recognise the importance of understanding the needs of people sleeping rough so that they can access the right support. Through the rough sleeping initiative and our Everyone In response, we have worked closely with local authorities to get a much better understanding of this at a local level. We have also undertaken national research over 2019-20, interviewing over 500 people with experience of rough sleeping across different areas in England to better understand their support needs and use of services. The full report will be published on gov.uk shortly.

From this research, we know that many people sleeping rough have substance misuse support needs, and many face challenges in accessing the support they need. These vital funds will provide the specialist support needed, to enable these individuals to rebuild their lives off the streets and move towards longer-term accommodation. It will include evidence-based drug and alcohol treatment, such as detox and rehab services. It will also fund wraparound support which is key to engaging people in drug and alcohol treatment services and improving access, such as co-occurring mental health and substance dependence workers and peer mentors. Public Health England's regional teams and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's expert rough sleeping advisers have worked closely with each of the 43 local areas to develop their plans for this year's funding.

This funding is a critical part of the Government's commitment to ending rough sleeping and to transforming the lives of some of the most vulnerable in society. Backed by significant Government support, these plans are part of over £700 million being provided to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping this year. By September, our ongoing Everyone In scheme had successfully supported over 29,000 vulnerable people; with over 10,000 in emergency accommodation and nearly 19,000 provided with settled accommodation or move-on support.

The recently announced £15 million protect programme and our winter support package, which includes a £10 million cold weather fund and a £2 million winter transformation fund will build on the continuing successes of Everyone In and ensure that we protect the most vulnerable from the dangers of covid-19 over the coming months.

Meanwhile, our Next Steps accommodation programme has made available the financial resources needed to help prevent as many of those accommodated during the pandemic as possible from returning to the streets.

We are also putting in place an unprecedented level of support to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping over 2021-22 with an additional £254 million resource funding. This takes total resource funding in 2021-22 to £676 million, a 60% increase compared to the 2019 spending review.

This funding will be supported by wider Governmental work to improve outcomes for the most vulnerable people in our society. For example, the Government recently announced £46 million for a new programme—Changing Futures—to provide better outcomes for adults experiencing multiple disadvantage, including people experiencing homelessness and substance misuse

support needs. The prospectus for the Changing Futures programme, asking for local area expressions of interest, was made available on 10 December.

We are working at pace to prepare for the delivery of next year's funding and will set out further detail about how areas in England can access this additional support under the substance misuse programme shortly.

I encourage all relevant partners and local authorities to consider how they can best use the available support to protect the most vulnerable.

[HCWS644]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

UK's Future Trading Relationship with Australia: Update on Negotiations

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): The third round of free trade agreement negotiations with Australia took place between 23 November and 4 December. During the two weeks, negotiators completed 46 discussions, spanning the breadth of the free trade agreement.

For every area, text was shared before the round. Both sides continued to have detailed textual discussions, and negotiators are now in the process of consolidating texts in several chapter areas. These include digital, telecommunications, customs, rules of origin, procurement, and cross-cutting provisions such as dispute settlement. Discussions in these chapters indicated areas of common understanding, where progress could be made.

We held detailed technical discussions on text in areas such as investment, professional business services and financial services, including on regulatory co-operation. Across all areas of the free trade agreement negotiation, we identified areas of convergence and some areas of divergence. Both sides are regularly engaging with domestic stakeholders to ensure our respective proposals are informed by their views.

Both sides exchanged their initial goods market access offers before the round. This exchange of goods market access offers is an early milestone, and the speed at which this stage has been reached demonstrates the momentum behind these negotiations. Discussions on market access will continue in parallel with discussions across the free trade agreement.

During the negotiations, the Secretary of State for International Trade had a call with Senator Simon Birmingham, and they agreed on the need to maintain momentum ahead of the next round.

After this round we have agreed to a number of intersessional discussions to ensure the pace is continued heading into the next round.

Below is a summary list of those areas discussed in the round, which continued to take place by video conference:

- Anti-Corruption
- Competition
- Customs and trade facilitation
- Development
- Digital/e-commerce
- Environment and clean growth
- Financial services
- Goods
- Good regulatory practices

Government procurement
 Innovation
 Investment
 Intellectual property
 Labour
 Legal and institutional provisions
 Telecommunications
 Trade remedies
 Rules of origin
 Services, including movement of natural persons, professional business services, international maritime transport services and delivery services
 Small and medium-sized enterprises
 State owned enterprises
 Sanitary and phytosanitary measures
 State-to-state dispute settlement
 Technical barriers to trade
 Transparency
 Trade and women's economic empowerment

Any deal the UK Government agree will be fair and balanced and in the best interests of the whole of the UK. As we will in all negotiations, we remain committed to upholding our high environmental, labour, product and food safety, and animal welfare standards in our trade agreement with Australia, as well as protecting the NHS.

[HCWS639]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Plan for Jobs Update

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government's plan for jobs is already supporting people back into employment. Jobcentres are open across the country, including 262 Jobcentres that recently started opening on Saturdays, and we are now making over 750,000 contacts a week. With an extra 7,000 work coaches already in place, we are on track to meet our commitment to double the number of work coaches by the end of this financial year. While many claimants are ready to move back into work, others may need additional support including acquiring work experience, training or new skills.

For young people especially, a lack of work experience can be a barrier to stepping on to the jobs ladder. That is why, through our kickstart scheme, we are funding the creation of new job placements for 16 to 24-year-olds, with work coaches referring young people to prospective employers who are able to spread the start date of job placements over the next year.

After inviting expressions of interest from employers in September, young people started benefiting from the first placements in November. We have seen a brilliant response from employers with over 32,000 roles already approved. Vacancies have been created with employers large and small and across a range of sectors, including

construction, digital and technology, logistics and manufacturing. Processing of applications is now proceeding at pace and we hope to see many more of our young claimants starting placements early in the new year.

In delivering kickstart, it is important that we use taxpayers' money carefully to ensure the quality of the wraparound support to young people and avoid fraud. Therefore our processes have rightly been rigorous in assessing applications made directly from employers and those made through a kickstart "gateway" where employers, particularly smaller ones, can receive help such as from a local authority or charity. We have over 200 "gateway" organisations now approved with a significant number of roles. However, we know our processes have led to a number of employers and organisations not being approved, particularly applications by sole traders, whether directly or through gateways.

We are continuing to review and improve our assessment and control processes, including those on financial due diligence. For example, currently there is only one route for sole traders to be involved in kickstart and that is through a gateway that provides a PAYE service as part of their support. We have now approved a new gateway, operated by the Federation of Small Businesses and in partnership with Adecco Working Ventures, to provide such a route. Other organisations are considering creating similar models.

Disabled people receiving support through Access to Work are eligible for kickstart placements and these will be actively promoted by our work coaches and national employment programme teams. I am pleased that a number of people on kickstart have come from particularly disadvantaged groups and we will continue to make our work programmes appropriately inclusive.

Other parts of our plan for jobs agenda being delivered by DWP include SWAPs, JETS and JFS: sector work-based academy programmes, job entry targeted scheme and job finding support. The number of referrals and starts made to SWAPs has exceeded our initial estimates and we are seeing thousands of people being supported through our other schemes. In light of this uptake and to ensure that we can continue to support claimants we are taking steps to increase the number of placements available on the SWAPs scheme.

Work is also under way on Restart, our long-term unemployment programme, that will support over one million individuals. We have issued our invitation to tender for the programme to start in summer 2021.

Our plan for jobs is the most ambitious employment programme ever undertaken, particularly the scope and extent of kickstart. I encourage members of the House to work with local employers to ensure kickstart helps provide a flying start for our young people.

[HCWS647]

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