

Thursday
17 December 2020

Volume 686
No. 154



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 17 December 2020

House of Commons

Thursday 17 December 2020

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

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

Strengthening the Union

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to strengthen the Union. [910429]

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of trends in the level of support for Scottish independence on his policies on strengthening the Union. [910453]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Mr Speaker, may I wish you and the whole House a safe and happy Christmas, on this, the last scheduled day of the Session?

The Government are committed to protecting and promoting the combined strengths of our Union, building on 300 years of partnership. It is vital that we continue to work across the UK on the challenges that we all face together, such as our recovery from covid-19, and to focus on issues such as protecting jobs and supporting the NHS.

Ben Everitt: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Perhaps he will agree that there can be no better example of the strength of our Union and of all four nations—the awesome foursome—working together than the successful funding, deployment, roll-out and creation of covid-19 vaccines, keeping communities safe across all four nations.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a vital point. Across all four nations of the United Kingdom people are being vaccinated thanks to the energetic efforts of the vaccine taskforce, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and, of course, our superb NHS. It is a source of particular pleasure to me that Scotland is enjoying that vaccine thanks to the efforts of the UK Government: proof that our NHS means that we are stronger together.

Douglas Chapman [V]: Today, a poll revealed that 58% of Scots would vote for independence. This is the 17th consecutive poll to show a positive result and we

are seeing a rise in support for independence across all age groups. The Cabinet Office can hoist as many Union flags as it wants, but what part of “We are leaving” does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster not understand?

Michael Gove: Of course, surveys of opinion are always fascinating, but the figures that I am interested in are those which show that the UK Government are spending more per capita in Scotland than they are in other parts of the United Kingdom and that thousands of Scots are now being vaccinated thanks to the efforts of the UK Government. If we look at a map of the world to see which countries are having their citizens vaccinated, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England are ahead of the pack: stronger together.

Mr Speaker: Can we have the SNP spokesperson, Pete Wishart?

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): You most certainly can, Mr Speaker, and thank you.

I listened carefully to the right hon. Gentleman’s answer, and yes, we are grateful for the vaccine, but I did not hear a response as to why he thinks that Scottish independence has now become the settled will of the Scottish people. This is not like him. He is usually quick to give his views about certain things, so why does he think that Scottish independence has sustained majority support, reaching a height of 58%, and is now the settled will of the Scottish people? Why is that the case?

Michael Gove: It is great to have the hon. Gentleman here, live and unplugged, rather than having to rely on a distant video screen, because his performance is always one that we savour. Sadly, however, I fear that his reliance on opinion polls is no substitute for his aversion to hard arguments. Why will he not engage with the facts? The facts show that, in Scotland, per capita spending including on our shared NHS is greater as a result of the broad shoulders of the UK Treasury. As I pointed out earlier, but as he declined to acknowledge, folk in Scotland are being vaccinated now, thanks to the efforts of the UK Government in a world-leading programme. I hope that, in the spirit of Christmas, he will acknowledge that this is a time for giving, and that he will, just once, give the benefit of the doubt to the UK Government.

Pete Wishart: I am likely to be the ghost of Christmas future, because it is not going the right hon. Gentleman’s way. Let me try to give him a few reasons. Let us see if he agrees with any of these: the disastrous Brexit that Scotland did not vote for; the attacks on our democracy; the undermining of our Parliament; and the Prime Minister—him. Maybe they are some of the reasons that we are now in the lead, but the main one is the arrogantly Trumpian way in which the right hon. Gentleman says no to a majority in a democracy. Does he think that constantly saying no to a majority in Scotland will drive support for independence down, or will it only further drive support for independence up?

Michael Gove: The Scottish Parliament is enjoying more powers now as a result of our departure from the European Union. Those powers allow the devolved legislature to have its own agriculture and environment policy, to supplement the leadership that it has been

showing in other areas. As we move towards the elections that are coming next year, many people will focus on the record of the Scottish Government. Of course there are admirable Ministers in the Scottish Government, but people will be asking why the UK Government are responsible for vaccinating people in Scotland and yet the Scottish Government are responsible for a decline in educational achievement in Scotland's schools and a growing divide between the well-off and less well-off. Social justice matters, and that is why, in the forthcoming Scottish parliamentary elections, the Scottish Conservatives will be making gains at the hon. Gentleman's expense.

UK-EU Negotiations

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of negotiations on the UK's future relationship with the EU. [910431]

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of negotiations on the UK's future relationship with the EU. [910433]

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of negotiations on the UK's future relationship with the EU. [910443]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 5, 6 and 7 together, because they are such good questions. They really are superb questions, and it is only right that they be taken together, in a one-er, in a group, as a collective.

Intensive talks are ongoing, with both negotiating teams working day and night to reach a deal. We are going the extra mile and continuing the negotiations to see whether an agreement can be reached, and we will of course continue to keep Parliament informed on our progress.

Dehenna Davison: I thank my right hon. Friend for his slightly delayed answer. He showed last week how successful the UK Government can be in negotiating with the EU, in their successful agreement in the Joint Committee. Will he therefore confirm that, although he has shown that the UK can do a deal with the EU, the Government will only conclude a deal on a free trade agreement that is in the best interests of our country and will be willing to walk away if they have no other choice?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is right; even if sometimes results are coming later than we might have wanted, I know that we will be doing everything possible to secure a good free trade agreement in the interests of the whole United Kingdom. The electors of Bishop Auckland, whom she represents so brilliantly, were clear when they voted to leave the EU that we need to do so by 31 December, and we will.

Mrs Murray [V]: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Opposition's apparent position of agreeing a deal no matter what is a ridiculous one to take during any negotiation?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is right; the Opposition party has taken a number of different positions on Brexit over the past few months, weeks and perhaps even days, but one thing that has never been clear is where exactly its red lines are. Ours are clear: we will always stand up for the United Kingdom. May I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the magnificent way in which she stood up for our coastal communities and fishing sector? Outside the common fisheries policy they will prosper, thanks to her.

Sally-Ann Hart: Fishing is reportedly a sticking point in the negotiations. My local fishermen in Hastings and Rye need to have faith that this Conservative Government will not sacrifice them, as previous Governments have, for free trade with the EU. Can I be confident in reassuring them that this Government will provide the basis for trust to be restored and built upon?

Michael Gove: Yes; my hon. Friend does an excellent job in standing up for her constituents in Hastings and Rye. The fishermen she represents so effectively know that we, as an independent coastal state, will be in control of our waters at the end of the transition period. Of course we want to make sure that we manage shared stocks in an appropriate way with all of our neighbours, including those outside the EU, but as an independent coastal state we are in control.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We all wish the negotiators well in this final stage, as they demonstrate that sharing sovereignty—gaining benefits by accepting obligations—is what will be required in order to reach the agreement that the Government say they want and which we all want. Can the right hon. Gentleman tell the House whether the legislation that will be required to give effect to any agreement will need to pass all of its stages in Parliament by 31 December this year in order to provide clarity to individual businesses about what they can do from 1 January next year, which is, after all, only 15 days away?

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman reminds us all of the importance of seeking to conclude these negotiations as quickly as possible. If they are concluded satisfactorily, we will request that the House return in order to make sure that we can legislate effectively. We believe we can pass the necessary legislation before 31 December to give businesses legal certainty for the future.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): This is how the Prime Minister described his oven-ready deal last November:

“put it in at Gas Mark 4, 20 minutes and Bob's your uncle.”

The Minister is nodding. Clearly, the Government have delivered half of it—leaving the European Union—but we have now passed six of the Prime Minister's deadlines for the other half, which is the agreement on our new relationship with the EU. In those same comments last November, the Prime Minister promised to end “dither and delay”. This week, we have heard of companies that have stopped exporting to the EU because of the uncertainty created by the Government's handling of these negotiations. Has the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster made an assessment of how many jobs have been lost through their incompetence?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding us that the Prime Minister not only secured a handsome election victory just over a year ago but did so on the basis of having secured a withdrawal agreement that was passed in this House, which meant that we left the European Union in January. Part of that withdrawal agreement was a protocol on Northern Ireland; some doubted that we would be able to reach a satisfactory conclusion, but we did. Others doubt that we will be able to have a satisfactory cause for celebration at the end of this year, when the transition period ends; I invite the hon. Gentleman to wait and see on that.

Paul Blomfield: I think we are all waiting to see.

Let me ask the Minister about a different part of the negotiations. When I have asked him previously, he has been unable to confirm that we will have access to the real-time information systems that we need to identify foreign criminals at our borders. We both understand why the Government's position has prevented him from giving that confirmation. This morning, speaking on Radio 4 just over an hour ago, the Home Secretary was pressed on the issue and said:

"All the type of channels that we have used in the past we will continue to use going forward."

Was she right? Anything less than an unequivocal endorsement will indicate that she was not.

Michael Gove: The Home Secretary is always right.

Blind and Partially Sighted People: Voting

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the accessibility of voting for blind and partially sighted people. [910432]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): The Government are committed to ensuring that elections are accessible for all those eligible to vote and have been working with the Royal National Institute of Blind People to improve the voting process for blind and partially sighted people.

Liz Twist: What steps is the Minister taking to introduce the recommendations made in the RNIB's most recent report, which found that only one in 10 blind voters and less than half of partially sighted voters could vote independently and in secret in the 2019 general election?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important issue and for the work she has done on improving the situation. We have been working intensively with the RNIB. Any systems and reforms that are brought in do need to be tested, and it is unfortunate that the cancellation of the elections this year has meant that we have not had that opportunity. But we will do next year. We are determined that, whether someone wants to vote in person or via post, they have a method of doing so that meets their needs and is secure.

UK Preparedness: End of Transition

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): If he will negotiate a phased period of implementation for new trading rules after the end of the transition period.

[910434]

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the UK's preparedness for the end of the transition period. [910437]

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to (a) maintain jobs and (b) support businesses at the end of the transition period. [910470]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The Government have been clear that the transition period will end on 31 December. We have made extensive preparations for a wide range of outcomes, including through a package of support for border infrastructure and the customs intermediary sector, and, of course, the phased implementation of border controls. A trader support service is also in place to help businesses trading under the Northern Ireland protocol, and we are scaling up the provision of Government helplines.

Christine Jardine [V]: A great deal of concern has been expressed to me by local businesses in Edinburgh West, and there are national concerns among industries such as the whisky sector, about the difficulties businesses are having with things like not knowing how they should label products given that there is, as yet, no clarity about our future relationship with the European Union. Anything that the Government can do to extend the period of adjustment would be appreciated by businesses and would help to offset the Scottish National party drive towards breaking up the United Kingdom, about which I know the Government share my concern.

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady is absolutely right; we need to do everything we can to support businesses in Scotland and elsewhere. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade is doing everything she can to help the whisky sector, not least through discussions with the US trade representative, Robert Lighthizer. More broadly, we want to make sure, in the free trade agreement that we seek, that there can be a smooth glide path for businesses in Scotland and elsewhere. I look forward to continuing to work with the hon. Lady. She has been a consistent voice for Scotland's businesses, both in the House and before she came to the Commons, and her advocacy, free of any partisan agenda, is something of which her constituents should be proud.

Dr Huq: The Minister is forever the smooth talker, as we saw in his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), but how exactly will our police access those real-time Schengen most-wanted criminal databases in 14 days' time? With 15,000 UK extradition requests in both directions last year alone under the European arrest warrant, how can he guarantee that, when we leave, Britain does not become a safe haven for murderers, rapists, terrorists and other cross-border criminals? People want precision on prosperity and security and, frankly, his one-liners are not good enough.

Michael Gove: I try not to weary the House with overlong answers. On the hon. Lady's substantive point, it is the case that we have extensive security and law enforcement and justice co-operation with our friends in the European Union and, indeed, beyond, and we will make use of all the instruments necessary in order to keep people safe.

Chris Elmore: The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will know that, last week, my Ogmores constituents received a hammer blow with the news that INEOS had decided to pull out of building their 4x4s, which had been promised by the ardent Brexiteer Jim Ratcliffe. The irony that INEOS's owner was such a vocal supporter of Brexit and has now fled to France to build his 4x4s has not been lost on any of my hard-working and highly skilled constituents. What assurances can the Minister give me that he is working to try to bring about more support for job growth in highly skilled manufacturing that can work for the people of south Wales?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. It is the case that, in South Wales, there is a concentration of skilled workers in advanced manufacturing who are the pride of the world. It is also the case, of course, that General Dynamics in Merthyr Tydfil, which is new to his constituency, is receiving support and investment from the defence industrial strategy. I look forward to working with him and indeed with the Welsh Government to ensure that his constituents can prosper in the future. It is absolutely vital that we work together to ensure that the skilled workers of the valleys have the bright future that they deserve.

UK-EU Negotiations: Devolved Administrations

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What recent discussions the Government have had with the devolved Administrations on the UK's trade negotiations with the EU. [910435]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): It is the case that I have regular contact with Ministers in the devolved Administrations in order to ensure that we can work effectively together in our negotiations with the EU, the last of which was on 3 December, when the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU negotiations met.

John Lamont [V]: Despite its warm words about being pro-trade, the Scottish National party has consistently voted against or abstained on trade deals coming before this House. Does the Minister agree that international trade is essential for supporting jobs across Scotland, and that by failing to support these trade deals the SNP is letting down workers across Scotland?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As has been pointed out by the Minister of Trade at this Dispatch Box on a number of occasions and as he has just reminded us, the SNP has never found a trade deal that it could vote for or like at any point. It is also the case that it wants to erect barriers between Scotland and its biggest trading partner—the rest of the United Kingdom. Trade brings prosperity. The SNP is not in favour of trade and therefore not in favour of Scotland's prosperity.

Regional Equality

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): What progress the Government have made on ensuring regional equality of economic opportunity. [910436]

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con): What progress the Government have made on ensuring regional equality of economic opportunity. [910444]

The Minister without Portfolio (Amanda Milling): It is just over a year since the general election and this Government are as committed to regional equality and creating economic opportunity as we were last December. In the face of covid-19, the Government have taken unprecedented fiscal action to support all regions and nations of the UK through the crisis, working to ensure that we protect jobs and businesses, minimise damage to the economy and deliver the right support as needed.

Craig Whittaker [V]: The Calder Valley has more than 19% of its workforce in the manufacturing sector and a further 26% in the financial sector. Both sectors have been hard hit by the pandemic. Can my hon. Friend say what steps the Government have taken to boost employment in the Calder Valley and in West Yorkshire, particularly as we emerge from the shadow of the pandemic?

Amanda Milling: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question on the importance of employment in the Calder Valley. I am sure that he will be pleased to learn that the Conservative party will be personally boosting employment in West Yorkshire when we open our new headquarters in Leeds next year. More broadly, the Government have announced unprecedented support across the whole of Britain to help unemployed people find a job, including the £2 billion kickstart scheme for young people and the £2.9 billion restart programme to help those unemployed for more than a year. We are doubling the number of work coaches.

Robert Lorgan: High Peak has a covid case rate lower than the national average yet is in tier 3. This is having a very severe effect on our local hospitality industry, which is so central to our economy. Can the Minister assure me that she is working with colleagues across Government to provide all necessary support to those businesses and to work to get High Peak out of tier 3 as fast as possible?

Amanda Milling: My hon. Friend is a very strong voice for his constituents in High Peak. Tier 3 restrictions were introduced based on evidence from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies about what was required to bring the R rate below 1 in a targeted way, thereby bringing transmission under control and reducing pressures on the NHS. Local authorities under tier 3 measures such as those in High Peak also receive additional funding for local public health initiatives to help to contain the spread of the virus and pave the way for local restrictions to be eased.

Covid-19: Consultants

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): What plans he has to review the value for money of the Government's use of consultants during the covid-19 outbreak. [910438]

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What plans he has to review the value for money of the Government's use of consultants during the covid-19 outbreak. [910450]

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Government outsourcing during the covid-19 outbreak. [910457]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez) [V]: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will croak through these questions together.

Working effectively with the private sector, including external consultants, has undoubtedly helped us to address some of the huge challenges the pandemic served up, but contracting authorities must extract value for money for taxpayers when working in this way. The outsourcing playbook updated in June includes many key policies to improve the quality of contracts in place with industry, but also to build internal civil service capability to reduce our reliance on external consultants.

Clive Lewis [V]: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: We will try to come back to you, Clive.

Andrew Gwynne [V]: The National Audit Office's investigation into Government procurement during the pandemic reflects the chaotic culture of outsourcing across Government. Contracts have been awarded after work has begun without competition and without any meaningful due diligence checks. How can the public have any trust in the Government's response if the Government are not transparent with them?

Julia Lopez: The National Audit Office set out a number of recommendations that we will be looking into, but the idea that we did not need to contract under emergency terms during the pandemic is inaccurate, and there are rules in place to allow us to do that. We have been slow to publish contracts because we experienced some problems, which I set out in the Westminster Hall debate last week, but we now have 100% of those contracts for the relevant bodies.

Margaret Greenwood [V]: The Good Law Project estimates that £1.6 billion-worth of contracts for covid-19 services have yet to be published, and details of contracts are consistently being published late. This is despite the fact that there is a legal requirement for those details to be published no more than 30 days after the contract is awarded. The Government are clearly failing in their duties. What is the Minister going to do to improve transparency in Government procurement?

Julia Lopez: We have now published in full all the contracts for personal protective equipment. There are some difficulties in doing that, which, as I say, I set out last week in the Westminster Hall debate. This week we have launched a Green Paper on public procurement, and we will be introducing a number of changes to our existing procurement regime when the transition period is over, which will improve the way we do things in future.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Minister mentions the Green Paper on procurement, which the Government published this week. The foreword to the Green Paper acknowledges the need to

“strengthen our longstanding and essential principles...of transparency, ensuring value for money and fair treatment of suppliers.”

With serious concerns being raised about the multiple contracts awarded by the Government, with no competition, to companies with strong connections to the Tory party and no clear track record of delivery, will the Minister put those warm words into action now and extend the Freedom of Information Act to all private companies, such as Serco, delivering public services?

Julia Lopez: I am not sure what the implications of extending FOI would be in terms of commercial confidentiality, but I am happy to look into that for the hon. Lady. The Green Paper is there to reassure and to deal with some of the problems we have had during the pandemic, where we have either had a full-fat tender that takes far too long in an emergency situation, or a situation of direct award. I am happy to look into her suggestion.

Mr Speaker: Let us head back to Norwich South and hope Alan Partridge does not get in the way of my hearing Clive Lewis.

Clive Lewis [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker; I can be heard at last.

Given that this Government have doled out £10.5 billion of our money without any competition, according to the National Audit Office, and frittered hundreds of millions on consultants and individuals whose main qualification seems to be that they are friends with members of this Government, does the Minister agree that in any other part of the world it would be called corruption, plain and simple?

Julia Lopez: I would not agree. It is very important to understand that every contract went through the same eight-stage process, where it was looked into. The contracts were done on the grounds of commercial sense, rather than anything to do with any connections. As the NAO report said, Ministers declared all interests and there was no evidence of any wrongdoing.

May 2021 Local Elections: Covid-19

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): What plans the Government have to ensure that the May 2021 local elections are covid-19 secure. [910439]

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): What plans the Government has to ensure that the May 2021 local elections are covid-19 secure. [910445]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): The UK Government are working with local returning officers, the Electoral Commission and public health bodies to identify and resolve the challenges involved in delivering the elections next May.

Kate Osborne: May 2021 will see a record number of different elections with various different voting systems all taking place on the same day. In normal times this would pose an immense logistical challenge, without the added complications brought about by the pandemic. Will the Minister outline why the Government have ruled out an all-postal ballot and refused to make any legislative changes to consider any new forms of voting, as we have seen across the globe?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for pointing out the extreme challenges that exist to ensure that the elections can take place in a covid-secure environment. They are considerable, but they cannot compromise the security and integrity of the ballot, and we feel that by moving to an all-postal system, that may be the case. We want people to be able to vote in person or by post, and we want them to do that in a covid-secure way, and that is what we and our partners are working towards.

Navendu Mishra: I know from my own experience that a large proportion of electoral staff and volunteers come from the demographic that would be considered vulnerable, with many retired and older people volunteering. If the Government have refused to provide any more funding for the running of the May 2021 elections, what steps are they taking to ensure that there is not a huge shortage of electoral staff?

Penny Mordaunt: One of the partners we are working with is public health organisations and authorities, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we want to ensure that everyone, whether they are officers or volunteers, is safe. We also anticipate, for example, that we will have extra demands for postal votes and so forth, and we are determined to ensure that we have the supply to meet that demand, but the issues that he raises are at the forefront of our minds.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) set out the scale of these elections very clearly. With less than five months to go until these major polls right across the United Kingdom, I hope the Minister will be able to respond to some questions that are on the minds of electoral administrators, campaigners and, most importantly, voters.

Will voters be required to wear face coverings in polling stations? If so, will polling clerks be expected to enforce that, and what resources will they get to do that? If they are not required to wear face coverings, what protections will be put in place to protect staff in polling stations? What steps are the Government taking to ensure that we have adequate staffing at polling stations? As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) set out—and I do not think the Minister adequately answered his question—so many of our volunteers are from an older demographic, and if the vaccine programme is not sufficiently rolled out, we face a shortage of staff.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising those issues. Hopefully, we will be in a happier place when the elections arrive because of the vaccination programme, but she raises some important issues. Just as retailers, healthcare settings and so forth have put in place measures to make them covid-secure, whether those are public health-related measures or the enforcement and policing of them, we will do the same at polling stations and at counts. We will ensure that there will still be the transparency that people want through scrutineers and so forth. We will also introduce some slight legislative changes to enable, for example, somebody who has to isolate very close to the election still to be able to cast their vote. We are working through all these issues with those organisations methodically, and we will have those elections. They will be safe, and they will still have integrity.

Electoral Fraud

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Electoral Commission on tackling electoral fraud. [910440]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): Ministers and officials engage with the Electoral Commission on a regular basis about work to support the effective and secure running of elections at a local and parliamentary level. We will continue to work with the Electoral

Commission to ensure that all elections that take place in the UK are both fair and free of any electoral fraud or attempted electoral fraud.

Tom Randall: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. In his judgment against the former Tower Hamlets Mayor Lutfur Rahman for electoral fraud, Richard Mawrey QC found that one council candidate had, in the space of six weeks, fought two wards in the same borough using two different names and two different false addresses. That fact came to light not through investigation by the authorities but because local residents were able to inspect copies of the electoral register under supervision. That right seems to have been thrown into doubt because of confusing guidance issued by the Electoral Commission. Could my right hon. Friend get in touch with the chief executive of the Electoral Commission to ensure that clear guidance is issued, so that members of the public looking into these measures do not find themselves prevented from accessing copies under supervision and so that further cases they are looking into can come to light?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. Let me be crystal clear: the law is absolutely clear on this. Anyone can inspect copies of the current register under supervision. The register is a public document to enable concerned citizens, such as those he refers to, to check that registers include only those who are properly eligible. I will, of course, look into the matter that he has raised, because we want clarity on this very important point.

British Nuclear Test Veterans

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What criteria were used by the Advisory Military Sub-Committee to inform its decision not to recommend a service medal award for British nuclear test veterans. [910442]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): The independent Advisory Military Sub-Committee first considers whether there are exceptional circumstances that merit a review. The criteria for historical recognition are the exposure of deployed personnel to a significant degree of risk to life and limb and to arduous conditions, in excess of what might be expected as part of normal service duties.

Carol Monaghan [V]: The UK is the only country that performed nuclear tests that has not formally recognised the contribution of its 20,000 nuclear test veterans. These elderly veterans, who were exposed to ionising radiation with no protection, have heard decades of rhetoric about their bravery, but without formal recognition, those are simply hollow words. Members on both sides of the House know that these veterans deserve a campaign medal, but his Department continues to refuse that modest request. Why does the Minister consider these veterans unworthy of a medal?

Johnny Mercer: I am afraid that there were a number of inaccuracies in the hon. Member's question. It is not my Department, and we are not the only country in the world that has this view. Only this summer, I met the chairman of the veterans group concerned and asked Veterans UK—this is separate from the medallic recognition scheme—to revisit and redesign the support available to our nuclear test veterans. I understand the disappointment

at this decision, but it is not within my gift. My job is to make sure these people are looked after properly. I am confident we are doing that. Again, I am happy to meet campaign groups to see what more we can do.

Civil Service Jobs

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the proportion of civil service jobs based outside London. [910447]

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the proportion of civil service jobs based outside London. [910454]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez) [V]: We want to make the administration of government much less Whitehall-centric and more reflective of the country as a whole. The Government are committed to an ambition to relocate 22,000 civil service roles out of the capital and into the regions and nations of the UK by the end of this decade. Our Places for Growth programme envisages a series of hub locations, with additional aligned offices within travelling distance of those hubs, and we hope this will deliver on our levelling-up ambitions.

Saqib Bhatti [V]: Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the west midlands is the perfect place to welcome a Government Department, and will she pay tribute to the Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, who has been working with Cabinet Office Minister Lord Agnew to make sure that we can take advantage of the economic investment and employment opportunities that relocation would bring to the west midlands?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He has a fantastic record of championing employment and investment in his region from his time with the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce and with the launch this month of his business forum. It is great to see him working hand in glove with the West Midlands Mayor, Andy Street, and I am very confident that, when we are ready to make the announcements on Places for Growth, the west midlands will benefit from this very exciting agenda.

Scott Benton: Does my hon. Friend agree with me that for Government to be able to make the best decisions for local communities, civil servants and Government Departments should be based across the country, including Blackpool, as this will allow the Government to truly represent the diverse nature of many of the communities across our United Kingdom? In that vein, will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss the different opportunities that relocating Government Departments can bring to Blackpool?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is a fantastic champion of Blackpool, and it has been great to see icons of civic pride, such as the Tower ballroom, secure culture funds thanks to his efforts. I wholeheartedly agree with him that the Government must be better connected to the communities we serve, and that really is the thrust of the Places for Growth programme. I am happy to meet him if he wishes to set out how his town can help in that agenda.

Office for Veterans' Affairs

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Office for Veterans' Affairs. [910452]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): The Office for Veterans' Affairs has fundamentally changed this country's offer to our veterans, pulling together all functions of Government to really understand the veterans' experience in this country. Briefly, I would like to pay tribute to all my colleagues who have supported us in that endeavour, particularly in this most difficult of years, during which I am confident that we have changed more than ever as we try to do our duty by those who have served.

Duncan Baker: I thank my hon. Friend for what he is doing for veterans. Service leavers, since 8 January this year, will have been given their veterans ID cards to mark their time in the armed forces, but will veterans who left before December 2018 still be able to apply for their card by the end of 2020? Will he update the House about those veterans who are looking forward to getting their card?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The veterans ID card is an important policy that this Government have brought forward. He is absolutely right that those who leave now will get an ID card. What we have struggled with is the verification of those who have served. The military, unfortunately, has been dealing with paper records for a number of years. That is changing, however, with the significant investments that we have funnelled into organisations such as Veterans UK. The ambition is to deliver this project once we have got to a place where we can prevent fraud and similar things, so that every veteran who has served gets their veterans ID card and is recognised in the way that this Prime Minister would want.

United Kingdom Internal Market Bill: Strength of Union

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect on the strength of the Union of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill. [910455]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): For centuries, the ability to trade freely without barriers across the United Kingdom has been the cornerstone of our shared prosperity, and the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill will help to maintain this integrated market to ensure the free flow of goods and services throughout the UK.

Neil Gray [V]: The majority support for independence in the last 17 polls in a row—58% this morning—is in part due to how Scotland has been treated by the Minister and his colleagues since the Brexit referendum. It is exemplified by the dictatorial United Kingdom Internal Market Bill, which rips the devolution settlement apart and is now the subject of legal challenge. Why are the UK Government unilaterally legislating without legislative consent with the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill when the required common frameworks could have been negotiated with the devolved nations, as they are still at the table?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. As he knows, I am a great admirer of him and of his colleague Alex Neil. One of the things about the approach that we are taking is that common frameworks work alongside the internal market Bill. Indeed, the House of Lords confirmed that approach just this week.

Topical Questions

[910399] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The House will know that last week I made a statement confirming that vice-president Maroš Šefčovič of the European Commission and I had reached agreement in principle on the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol. As set out in my written statement issued yesterday, I am pleased to say that vice-president Šefčovič and I shall be meeting again later today in a formal session of the withdrawal agreement Joint Committee. I look forward to updating the House on the outcome of that meeting.

Jonathan Edwards: I was contacted late last night by a businessman in my constituency who is reliant on imports from the continent. He cannot find a haulage firm willing to carriage on his behalf, due to the current delays at the ports. He is very concerned; unless this issue is resolved, his business will not survive into the new year. What is the Minister's advice to my constituent?

Michael Gove: I know what a diligent constituency Member the hon. Gentleman is. If he gets in touch with my office, I will be directly in touch with the business concerned.

[910400] **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) [V]: The recent announcement by the Chancellor of a £220 million pilot scheme for the shared prosperity fund is a welcome step forward. However, there are some in Cornwall who claim that this is a sign that the Government will break their commitment to match the funding that places such as Cornwall received through the EU. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government are committed to replacing EU funding, which amounted to £1.5 billion per year, in full, and that, as the Prime Minister has stated, Cornwall will receive its share in a dedicated pot?

Michael Gove: I can absolutely reassure my hon. Friend that, as set out at the spending review, funding for the UK shared prosperity fund will be increased so that it at least matches the EU receipts on average, which reached around £1.5 billion a year. We will publish a UK-wide framework in the spring, which will set out full details, and to help local areas prepare for the introduction of the SPF, we are providing the additional £220 million that my hon. Friend referred to. Of course, we will work closely with Cornwall to ensure that it gets the funding that it needs, and for which he is such an effective advocate.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The UK's ports are our gateway to the world. Yesterday, the port infrastructure fund was finally announced. We found out that Dover did not get the £33 million that it had

asked for; instead, it got just £33,000. Portsmouth faces a shortfall of £8 million. The Minister recently visited that port, so he knows its huge importance. Why have the Government short-changed vital infrastructure critical to the everyday economy, while at the same time wasting millions of pounds on consultants and middlemen as part of Tory cronyism?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. The funding in the port infrastructure fund was specifically available for projects that were due to be delivered by July next year, when full import controls will be in place. Dover was bidding for some infrastructure that would be complete by 2023, which is intended, of course, to take advantage of the new opportunities that control over our borders will bring. We are working with Dover to ensure that a new approach towards juxtaposed controls can be in place.

We are also working with Portsmouth. Portsmouth port is not unique, but it is certainly singular in that it is owned by the local authority, which does a very good job. We are working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Transport and others to ensure that not just the port but the broader infrastructure in Portsmouth and that part of Hampshire is sufficient for the needs of port users.

Rachel Reeves: I thank the Minister for that answer, but he needs to give greater assurances that there will not be the delays and disruption that we all fear. A letter from the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), to my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) states:

"Ministers...decided that all bids which are recommended to be supported will be funded to 66%".

Not 100%, but just 66%. What a false economy that is, given the cost to British businesses and consumers of delays and disruption at the border. Will the Government publish the full rationale for each of their 53 port decisions, not least since some companies received next to nothing while one port company, which coincidentally pays a former Tory Cabinet Minister £100,000 a year, was awarded £26 million yesterday by this Government?

Michael Gove: Of course, we would be delighted to make sure that the full assessment criteria are shared with the hon. Lady and with all constituency Members. The port infrastructure team had an independent team to look at the eligibility of all the ports that applied and to assess all the bids. They were done on the most rigorous of bases. It is the case that a number of ports have welcomed the additional funding and the additional infrastructure support it will give, but we will continue to work with all ports to ensure we can have a world-class border. The publication today of our future border plan for 2025 lays out the means by which we will do so.

[910401] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): The year 2021 will bring significant opportunities for coastal communities such as Lowestoft to drive forward the covid recovery in the energy, fishing, food and trade sectors. Will my right hon. Friend outline the steps he is taking to ensure that the promotion of investment in ports, manufacturing and processing infrastructure is fully and properly co-ordinated between his and other Departments, including the Departments for Business,

Energy and Industrial Strategy, for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, for Transport and for International Trade?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Lowestoft is a hugely important port. All the ports in Suffolk and those that serve the North sea are ports in which we wish to invest, because, as he rightly points out, their potential, not just—increased access to our own fishing waters but new investment in renewable—is growing all the time. Our border strategy, which we published today, has been published in consultation with other Departments. He is absolutely right that we need to continue to work with them to take advantage of the opportunities of the future.

[910405] **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Happy Christmas, Mr Speaker.

We will not be in the single market or the customs union, but the deal on the table offers free trade without tariffs, minimum environmental and worker protection, and sovereignty to diverge for selective adjudicated tariffs if, and only if, we undercut EU standards. Why then, on the last day of Parliament, is the Minister continuing to threaten UK business with no deal, plunging them into immediate tariffs for no divergence in just two weeks' time?

Michael Gove: Bore da, Mr Speaker, and to the hon. Gentleman.

It is the case that the UK Government have been clear about the importance of maintaining sovereignty, the right to diverge and full control over our waters. We shall not be ambiguous about that, but we are determined, if we can, to reach a free trade agreement. Our negotiators are working hard to that end.

[910402] **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, and colleagues across the Chamber are aware that the world's finest ceramics are made in the potteries of Stoke-on-Trent, and that the ceramics industry, both traditional and advanced ceramics, is integral to the UK's economy. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, whether the outcome of the talks with the EU is Canada or Australia, Stoke-on-Trent companies such as Churchill China and Steelite will continue to be world leaders in manufacturing and production?

Michael Gove: Not just the company my hon. Friend mentions, but Royal Doulton, Wedgwood, Spode and of course more recently Emma Bridgewater: those are names that are known across the globe. They shine a light on the brilliant ceramics sector that is housed in Stoke-on-Trent and the potteries towns. We will ensure in the future, as we leave the European Union, that across the world people have the chance to dine off and to drink from the first-class products made in his and his neighbours' constituencies.

[910403] **Dr Dan Poulter** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con) [V]: Under the coalition Government, great progress was made to improve Government procurement practices. There is still much more that can be done, particularly in the NHS, by taking advantage of national procurement where it does not currently

exist. Given the scale of the debt that our country is now in following the covid crisis, will my right hon. Friend the Minister reassure me that the Government will redouble their efforts to improve Government procurement practices going forward?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. May I take this opportunity briefly to thank him for the work he has undertaken as vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus and the work he continues to do on the NHS frontline? He has shown real leadership in the fight against this dreadful virus. He is absolutely right to say that we need to improve procurement. The procurement Green Paper published earlier this week is a part of that, but I hope to work with him and others on the frontline to ensure that the Department of Health and Social Care does even better in the future.

[910417] **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: In his previous response to me, the Minister talked about looking after the nuclear test veterans. Since they have not received compensation for their exposure to ionising radiation, that is frankly laughable. Is not the real reason these veterans have not received their medals the fact that that would be an admission by the UK Government that they were placed in an extremely hazardous situation?

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): That is not the real reason at all. This is a very clear process that is rightly outwith the control of Ministers. There is an independent committee that looks at medallic recognition. It has looked at this again and come to the decision that it has. It would be worthwhile funnelling energies into how we look after this special cohort of people. This decision does not diminish their service in any way, and, again, I am happy to meet both the hon. Lady and the chairmen of the campaign groups to make sure that we are doing all we can to look after those who have served.

Mr Speaker: Matt Vickers—not here. Oh dear, it is not a good day. Dr Rupa Huq—not here. It is definitely not a good day.

[910407] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): Yesterday, Emma McClarkin, the chief executive of the British Beer and Pub Association, told the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee of the frustration in her industry at not being privy to data or involved in the drafting of guidance related to restrictions on hospitality. Seventy million pints were lost in the first lockdown. As brewers and publicans try to understand changing and complex data, will my right hon. Friend consider ways to involve the industry at as early a stage as possible and share as much data as possible so that clear guidance can be issued and the industry can plan ahead?

Michael Gove: May I, join you, Mr Speaker, in lamenting the absence of the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq)? I hope that she is well and—*[Interruption.]* Anyway, we are all rooting for her.

Mr Speaker: Can we root for Matt Vickers as well?

Michael Gove: Well, I do actually. Matt is a great guy.

Mr Speaker: Let us be consistent.

Michael Gove: You are absolutely right, Mr Speaker. I lament all these absences, but I am even more grateful for the presence of my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall), who has asked his second question in this session. It is a very good one, because he is absolutely right. The increasing and welcome support for the spread of real ale has meant that necessarily, as pubs have closed and moved towards takeaway, we have lost some of that production, and those in the hospitality sector have faced very difficult times. He is absolutely right that we need to work more closely with the hospitality sector to understand the pressures that they face at this very difficult time, and I am grateful to him for raising this issue.

[910408] **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: Derbyshire is a fantastic place to live and work. It has an all-round economy and great culture. Will the Minister tell us what steps he is taking to increase the proportion of the civil service based outside London, and when they will be coming to Derbyshire?

Michael Gove: I can only agree with my hon. Friend: Derbyshire is a great place to live. It rivals Lancashire in the many attractions that it has for people of good taste. Early in the new year, we will be announcing steps that we are taking to move more jobs and more civil service responsibilities out of Whitehall and into locations such as Derbyshire, Lancashire and, of course, Teesside.

[910421] **Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab) [V]: Listen, Dominic Cummings, the man who single-handedly destroyed the nation's trust on covid-19, was booted out of No. 10 with a £40,000 pay increase. This is at a time when hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people have lost their livelihoods, and many more will follow. Millions of other people are facing a real-terms pay freeze. Does the Minister agree that this is totally and utterly immoral—in fact, obscene? At a time of good will, does he recognise that good old British saying, “What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander”?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful for the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. He is a brilliant campaigner and a doughty fighter. He has been at the frontline of the trade union movement and at the heart of the Labour party for many years. He puts his case very, very well. I respectfully disagree with him on the particular case that he mentions, but I do agree with him on the broader need for us all to recognise the significant sacrifice that the working people across this country

have been making during the covid pandemic, and I thank him for the way in which he has fought for his constituents to ensure that our NHS is there for them. I look forward to working with him outside the to and fro of this Chamber, because I know what a great-hearted man he is.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Several businesses in my constituency of Kensington are major importers; I think, for example, of Innocent Drinks, which is a large importer of fruit juice. Clearly such businesses do not want to have to pay tariffs. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that no stone is being left unturned in efforts to negotiate a free trade agreement with Europe?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The constituency she represents is home to a variety of innovative businesses, many of which trade successfully with Europe. This is why we are doing everything we can to secure a free trade agreement, but of course it cannot come at any price. I am grateful to her for endorsing Innocent Drinks, although at this time of year I hope we all have the chance to indulge in some not-so-innocent drinks as well.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): The Government's plans to mimic the Republican party's voter suppression tactics risk denying millions of people the right to vote. Hardest hit will be already marginalised groups such as the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Despite their already being one of the most discriminated against groups in the country, neither the Government's equalities impact assessment nor the Electoral Commission's evaluation of voter identification pilots makes reference to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Instead of at best ignoring those communities and at worst demonising them, will the Government scrap plans to create further barriers to their democratic participation?

Julia Lopez: We will continue to work with charities and civil society organisations, including those that represent Traveller and Roma communities, to ensure that voter ID is inclusive of all eligible voters, but we have no plans to scrap it. It is extremely important to protect the integrity of our democracy, and I fully support it.

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

10.32 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

10.36 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 4 January will include:

MONDAY 4 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 5 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Financial Services Bill.

WEDNESDAY 6 JANUARY—Opposition day (14th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 7 JANUARY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 8 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

Subject to the House's decision later, we will rise for the Christmas recess at close of business today. Hon. and right hon. Members will recognise that talks with the European Union continue, and should a deal be secured, it is the Government's intention to request a recall so that Parliament may pass the necessary legislation. Parliament has done and continues to do its duty, and has long shown that it can act quickly and decisively when necessary. I am sure that the whole House will agree that the country would expect nothing less.

The Government realise that that duty falls not just on MPs and peers but on the parliamentary staff who make this place function, and to whom we are very grateful. While we may therefore sit again in the coming days, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the staff of the House, civil servants and Members' assistants for the commitment and dedication they have shown in keeping the parliamentary show going throughout this extremely difficult year. Hon. Members are always grateful for the hard work of the ever-informative Doorkeepers, the cheerful cleaners who have gone about their work regardless of the perception of risk, which was particularly high at the beginning of the pandemic, and the wise Clerks, whose intelligence does not seem to have been affected by the loss of their wigs, which I used to think were essential to keeping their brains warm and up to full speed—

Mr Speaker: I still think they are essential.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am glad to note your intervention, Mr Speaker, which has, I hope, been recorded.

We are grateful to the smartly behelmed police officers, who cheer us with their badinage and keep us safe with their blunderbusses; to the catering staff, who have not lost their appetite for keeping us well nourished; to the broadcasting team, who have probably been under more pressure than any other part of our community but have none the less gone about their work quietly and effectively; and to the *Hansard* team, who always correct my errors and smooth away the knots and gnarls of an extempore text.

I hope that all those whose work supports the smooth running of the United Kingdom Parliament feel proud of their contribution in tackling the pandemic this year. I know that should the House be recalled, they will continue their dutiful service to our democracy. For that, Mr Chri—I mean Mr Speaker, not Mr Christmas;

you see, Mr Speaker is a very Father Christmas-like figure, spreading goodness and cheerfulness wherever he goes—for that, Mr Speaker, they deserve the highest praise and a restful Christmas. I can deliver the first, but I fear that I cannot promise the second.

Valerie Vaz: That was a very long business statement. I thank the Leader of the House for the statement and for the Opposition day. I know he is a person of his word and he will not take it away, as he has done previously. It will be Epiphany and he knows that the Opposition will come riding to the rescue of the House and the country with gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Normally we have advance sight of the business statement, but I will not thank the Leader of the House for the advance speculation about when we would rise because that is a ridiculous way to do business. Nick Watt speculated on "Newsnight" on Tuesday about what the Leader of the House would say, when the date has been announced for quite some time.

In his podcast, the Leader of the House said that he wanted to "retrospectively correct" domestic law to recognise the agreement. May I ask him when and why? He went on to say:

"Normally, you would expect a treaty to be ratified before it comes into force"—

yes, that is the legal way—

"but if both sides accept that ratification is done in a different way, that is theoretically possible".

This is a democracy, not a tutorial. The European Parliament might agree the deal on 28 December. What will happen? What is the legal position if the House does not come back between 31 December and 5 January? Why was this slipped out in a podcast and not said in the House? Despite the Government's majority, they clearly do not have confidence that the deal will be passed by the House.

Why is the Equalities Minister making statements outside the House about no unconscious bias training and how equalities will change?

The Minister for vaccines has not bothered to come to the House to tell us how many vaccines have been administered. That is so important. Last week, the Health Secretary said he did not know and the Department for Health and Social Care said tens of thousands. Why do we not know? If we can keep track of our parcels, why can we not keep track of our vaccines? It is important because we need to know whether the Government's criteria are being applied, and because we have the most deaths in the whole of Europe.

We also have the worst growth. We will hear later in a statement that taxes will be passed on to our constituents—that local authorities will be tasked with raising taxes from our constituents.

I know that the Leader of the House wants to be transparent and accountable. On Tuesday the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution said in a written statement:

"Transparency is a key principle of public procurement. Openness underpins accountability for public money, anti-corruption and the effectiveness of procurement."—[*Official Report*, 15 December 2020; Vol. 686, c. 14WS.]

Not for now, but for future pandemics: that is the theory. Will the Leader of House therefore explain why Fleetwood Strategy, run by a person who played a key role in the last election, was given £123,500 for research

[Valerie Vaz]

into Government communication? We do not need research; we just need the Government to communicate. A former Tory director of communications during the election campaign received £819,000 for focus groups. Will we see the results? What about special advisers—those friends of the Government, or FOGies—getting a 50% pay rise when our teachers, our public service workers and our police officers are not? Worse still, £200,000 of costs for a FOGy who wanted to continue with action against a person he had sacked would pay for six nurses.

The Leader of the House has been assiduous in responding to our questions, particularly on Nazanin and Anousheh. He will know that Ruhollah Zam was an Iranian journalist who was executed. While the Foreign Secretary is on his tour to India, hopefully sorting out our constituents' relatives—the farmers in India—will he also look at whether Anousheh and Nazanin can come home for Christmas? Of course there is also Luke Symons.

Sadly, I must pay tribute to David O'Nions, who used to work for this House and who died in March. His colleagues, friends and family have not had a chance to pay tribute to him. I hope we will get an opportunity to do that.

Finally, I thank you, Mr Speaker, all the Deputy Speakers and all your staff for getting this House together. You set up the taskforce. Marianne Cwynarski was absolutely brilliant in keeping us safe. The Clerk of the House, the Clerk Assistant and everyone in the Table Office have worked continuously to make sure we do our work. John Angeli in the Broadcasting Unit actually got better as we went along. I thank the Serjeant at Arms, Phil Howse and all the Doorkeepers, who also kept us safe, and the Official Reporters. The catering staff kept us fed and watered, and of course, the building has been cleaned so thoroughly. I thank all our Chief Whips on all sides, and the Whips, who have worked really hard—I know it is hard work casting all those 200 proxies—as well as every right hon. and hon. Member, and all their families. I hope they have a peaceful Christmas and a very happy new year.

Mr Rees-Mogg: If I may continue in the spirit of good will, I thank the right hon. Lady, who is an absolute pleasure to deal with in the way that things have to be dealt with. She is a very important advocate for her own party, but does that with enormous charm. I am not winning her over to conservatism, but it is always a pleasure doing business with her, and indeed with the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). It is a pleasure working with all the people we work with in the House.

The right hon. Lady paid tribute to David O'Nions—may the souls of all the faithful departed, by the mercy of God, rest in peace, and I hope that he will be commemorated properly. She also raised, quite rightly, the issue of the people held illegally. I do write to the Foreign Secretary every week after business questions to ensure this is highlighted, and will do so again. I am very grateful to her for raising these points, because I think it is important that they remain at the forefront of the political debate.

The right hon. Lady made a point about Opposition day. Yes, it is indeed the feast of the Epiphany, and we are hoping—though this may be the triumph of hope

over experience—that we will see some wisdom from the Opposition on that day. It is a hope that has been dashed many times in the past.

The right hon. Lady also asked about how business has been organised. Business has been organised so that the key Bills will receive Royal Assent today: therefore, we have achieved what we needed to achieve, and the one thing outstanding is an unknowable. We have to wait and see whether or not a deal will be achieved, in which case there will be legislative consequences. I am very flattered that she listens to the Moggcast—informative and interesting podcast that it is, done fortnightly through the auspices of ConservativeHome—but that is not a statement of will be going on in the House. It is a discussion about theoretical aspects, and the question that was raised was “Theoretically, could a treaty be ratified *ex post facto*?” The answer I gave was that this would be legally extremely abnormal and open to challenge, so I am not sure that the right hon. Lady paid as close attention as she ought to have done, although the episode is still available to be downloaded and listened to should she wish to spend Christmas paying closer attention to precisely what I said.

As regards the vaccines Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), he was here in the House a couple of days ago for questions. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has been absolutely assiduous in updating the House, and there will be a statement from the relevant Ministry after I have spoken. The right hon. Lady suggested that taxes were going to be going up; I do not know how she knows this, because the Chancellor guards these matters very closely to his own chest in the period before a Budget, so that will be a matter for him. However, the manifesto commitments of the Conservative party were extraordinarily clear in relation to our being the party of low taxation.

As for procurement, it had to be done quickly. The right hon. Lady has criticised the communications, but it was absolutely essential to see that the messages were getting across effectively—to see whether they were the messages that worked, that persuaded people to change their behaviour, because it was the most extraordinary level of change in behaviour ever known in this nation. People were not allowed to visit each other's homes; people were not allowed to go to the shops, or to restaurants. We had to know that the message was getting across effectively, and therefore having a degree of focus group and research into how effective it was seems to me a sensible use of Government—taxpayers'—money.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Yesterday, I had the pleasure of an excellent Teams call with the wonderful Sam, Vicki and Lindsay, who are local district nursing students who will be working over Christmas. Tomorrow, I will be out with the friend-to-friend volunteers in my constituency, delivering 80 afternoon cream teas to elderly and vulnerable people in our community. Will my right hon. Friend please join me in thanking all our amazing key workers and volunteers, who will be going the extra mile this festive season to support our wonderful communities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thought my hon. Friend was going to invite me to a cream tea; I feel rather let down. He is absolutely right to highlight the heroic contribution of

all our key workers, and to mention Sam, Lindsay and Vicki and the fact that they will be working over Christmas. Key workers have shown a huge amount of dedication throughout the pandemic; whether they are public servants or essential workers in the private sector, they are the ones who have kept our economy turning under immense pressure. They have shown great dedication to their work and to the nation, be they supermarket staff, cleaners, teachers or bus and train drivers. We should be really proud of the contribution made by the subjects of Her Majesty during this pandemic.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: What a sad and inglorious end to the Brexit adventure: days before the end of transition, we are limping to the finishing line with no idea whether there will be a deal or, if there is, what will be in it. I understand the Government's intention is to recall Parliament if there is a deal to discuss, but what if the Government fail to get a deal? Are we not to consider the consequences of a hard break in trading with the EU? Have the Government no plans to present to Parliament to mitigate that disaster?

What if there is a deal? When will we see an economic assessment of its provisions? When will the devolved Administrations be consulted on the many areas within their purview? How on earth are hon. Members seriously expected to digest and analyse 1,600 pages of text? Is not the truth that the Government are preparing to railroad through a grubby little deal, using their majority to avoid scrutiny?

Mr Speaker, this is the season of good will, and I wish you, the Leader of the House and all hon. Members a happy Christmas. However, it is also a time to reflect on the big changes of 2020. This is a year in which support for this Government evaporated in England, and in Scotland, this is the year in which the long-standing majority of people who have been opposed to the Tories for 70 years have coalesced around the prospect of independence.

Hon. Members know I like to keep the House updated on Scottish public opinion, and in recent weeks there have been further opinion polls that report a majority for independence. The latest today is in *The Scotsman* newspaper, which puts yes at 58%. That is the 17th poll in a row recording a majority for Scotland to take control of its own affairs, so I repeat the question I have been asking all year. When will this Parliament have the opportunity to consider changing opinion in Scotland, and if people vote in the coming Scottish general election to review the way Scotland is governed, will this Government respect that vote? Perhaps, since it is Christmas, the Leader of the House might give me an answer this time.

Mr Rees-Mogg: What a pleasure it is to see that the joy of Christmas has spread to Edinburgh and to have the hon. Gentleman's joyful, happy countenance shine down upon us once more, wishing us all a merry Christmas, which I heartily reciprocate. I hope he heard me say earlier what a pleasure it was—I mean this genuinely—todeal with him over the course of the year.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the deal that is being done, or not being done, and the need for it to be ratified. He criticises the Government for potentially using their majority to pass any consequent Act of Parliament. I would point out that that is how democracy

works: you get a majority and then you use that majority. It is not particularly shocking—it is what is done in Parliaments across the world. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister pointed out, it is going to be a great opportunity for Scotland. He pointed out that Mrs Sturgeon is going to have more fish than she could eat in a lifetime, because we will have control of our fishing waters. Indeed, I think they are going to need to get a bigger boat in Scotland to collect all that essential fish.

The strength of the United Kingdom grows every day. Have we not just heard that Aberdeen City Council wants to separate from Edinburgh, to avoid the machinations and failures of the SNP—the failures in education, the failures in policing and the failures in the health service in Scotland, led by the SNP? What is Aberdeen saying? “Let's cut out this failed Administration run by the SNP—why don't we go directly to London to have our settlement done with London?” Is it not fascinating that the failures of the left-wing SNP are making councils in Scotland try to escape from its auspices and authority? The strength of the United Kingdom has provided £8.2 billion to keep the Scottish economy going. Together as one country, one group of taxpayers have helped every part of the country with a depth, a strength, a thoroughness that would not be possible if they were separated.

When the Scottish people had a vote, a real vote, not a gossip with an opinion pollster, and they went to a polling station and put a cross in a box, how did they vote? They voted to remain part of the United Kingdom. We should be proud of that and delighted about it, and we should celebrate. We should have an extra glass at Christmas to celebrate the one United Kingdom.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the relationship between alcohol and homelessness? Shelter has done some work whereby it found out that two thirds of respondents cite drugs and alcohol as a reason for their being homeless. HARP Southend has done a fantastic job in reducing rough sleeping during the coronavirus pandemic. Particularly as we move towards Christmas, I hope that the Government will continue to work hard on the issue of homelessness. I wish everyone a very happy Christmas and a far better 2021, when I hope Southend will become a city.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have been waiting for that last bit, though I might remind my hon. Friend that a jubilee is coming in 2022 and that sometimes is an occasion when more cities are made—but I am not promising anything. To come to his very important point, alcohol and substance abuse have long been associated with homelessness, and I would like to join him in commending the charity HARP Southend for reducing rough sleeping during the pandemic. With Christmas approaching, the need to end rough sleeping is thrown into even sharper relief. I commend my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary for the effort he and his Department have made this year to support the homeless and end rough sleeping.

The Government have taken unprecedented action to support the most vulnerable people in our society during the current pandemic, backed by more than £700 million of taxpayers' money to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping this year alone. On Monday, the rough sleeping Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), announced £23 million of funding for this year to provide substance misuse treatment and recovery services for people sleeping rough. That will be backed by additional spending of £52 million in 2021-22.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement. The Backbench Business Committee will meet this afternoon for the second time this week to determine what will fill the time allocation just given to us for 7 January. Can he confirm that the House will indeed meet in the week beginning 4 January, even if it is recalled next week? It is important to give Back-Bench Members some certainty before they accept time for debates being offered to them.

I declare an interest, as chair of a primary school governing body here in Gateshead. I gather that this morning the permanent secretary at the Department for Education told the Public Accounts Committee that discussions about the school return in January are still ongoing and Ministers have not communicated a decision yet. Can the Leader of the House arrange for the Education Secretary to come to the House to make a statement to explain what is being proposed, so that before the term ends tomorrow headteachers, their staff, parents and pupils will know what is expected of them in the first week of January?

Mr Speaker, may I wish you, the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House, Members across the House, parliamentary staff and, of course, our excellent Backbench Business Committee staff a very happy, peaceful and restful Christmas, as we look to put 2020 well and truly behind us?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I hope the Committee meeting this afternoon is a useful and successful one. I am very grateful for the work the Backbench Business Committee does to ensure that this House debates matters that are of the greatest interest to Members. The time has been allocated for the first week back, and that is the week we intend to be back. As regards education, the Government have been absolutely clear about the importance of schools being open and of people going to school to receive their education in person. In some ways it has been like the House of Commons, in that both legislating and education work better when one is physically present.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): Thanks to sound financial management, Conservative-controlled Nottinghamshire County Council plans to set a balanced budget in the next financial year. That rather contrasts with Labour-controlled Nottingham City Council, which is £1 billion in debt, lost nearly £40 million and 200 jobs after its energy firm Robin Hood Energy collapsed, and set up a Christmas market that closed after one day. Its own report said that

“the council recognises the significant shortfalls in its governance and management practice”.

Could we have a debate to explore the many shortcomings of Nottingham City Council, which affect not only residents in the city but those in surrounding areas such as Gedling?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is a well-known fact that socialists ultimately run out of other people’s money, which is why I welcome my hon. Friend’s question. It is a delight

to be able to congratulate good and efficient Conservative councils on their sound financial management. He is not the first Member to allude to the hare-brained schemes and insolvent energy companies cooked up by left-wing councils in recent years. It is a great shame that the people of Nottingham have to suffer under such mismanagement. They must look on in envy at their neighbours living in the county council area who enjoy a proper return on their council taxes. Our local authorities, like us in this House, must remember that they serve their electors and their taxpayers, and they should always be clear that they have a duty to manage their finances properly. I hope that their voters take note.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Yesterday we heard from all Governments across the UK about the need to revise the Christmas restrictions given the increased risk of spreading coronavirus. Parliament is about to rise, but we are aware that we may be returning before 5 January. I know that Christmas is the season for giving, but I am sure the Leader of the House will agree that we do not want to be giving covid to ourselves, our loved ones and the critical staff we have been thanking here today. If we do return during the Christmas period and in January, will he support testing for MPs and any staff who have to return to the estate?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises an interesting point. That matter has been considered by the Commission, and it will be kept under review. It is a reasonable thing for her to suggest, because this is a covid-secure workplace, and the authorities have worked very hard to ensure that, but we should certainly consider taking further measures that may help. I am sorry that I cannot give her a clearer answer than that it is under consideration.

Mr Speaker: Let us head to the home of Alfred the Great, with Ian Liddell-Grainger.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: Good morning, Mr Speaker.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that the misuse of public funds is tantamount to theft. Somerset County Council is squandering public money to promote this ghastly nightmare plan for a single unitary authority. The latest lunacy, believe it or not, is a glossy full-page newspaper advert full of lies, but the scandal is that we have to pay for it. The leadership are behaving like Danish Vikings, pillaging the public purse. They have even used money earmarked to fight covid to balance their books. They have no interest in reuniting Somerset. Can we have a debate on greedy thugs wasting money? King Alfred would be appalled. Rudyard Kipling had the answer:

“We never pay any-one Dane-geld,

No matter how trifling the cost;

For the end of that game is oppression and shame,

And the nation that plays it is lost!”

Merry Christmas!

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is forthright as ever. We should remember the great contribution to the world from the victory of Alfred the Great, the refusal to give in to the Danes and all that he did when he was in the Somerset levels. My hon. Friend is right to attach great importance to the use of public funds. We all have a duty to ensure that taxpayers’ money is spent well. I

look back to the halcyon days when Somerset County Council was run by Henry Hobhouse, my late godfather, who was a great leader of the council. When he was in charge, things were done properly.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: Tonight I will join Disability Talk for the results of its poetry competition. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the 126 people who submitted such heartfelt poems? Will he pledge to ensure that Parliament is more accessible to disabled and clinically extremely vulnerable people, which has sadly not been the case during the pandemic? With that in mind, does he have any plans to ensure remote participation during any possible recall of Parliament while we discuss the crucial topic of Brexit? I would love to be able to tell tonight's winners that Parliament is accessible to all—would the Leader of the House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I of course congratulate the 126 people who have entered the poetry competition, and I hope that the hon. Lady will use future business questions to read out selections to the House; I think that would be enjoyed. We had poetry from my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), and I hope the hon. Lady will follow in his footsteps.

As the hon. Lady knows, I tabled a motion to allow the extremely clinically vulnerable to participate in our debates; unfortunately, it was talked out by Labour Members, with the support of the SNP. That is a matter of considerable regret.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): As this may well be the last time that I speak in the Chamber this year, I have reflected on my first 12 months as an MP, and what stands out more than anything is the strength of communities across Crewe and Nantwich. We saw charities, community groups and volunteers respond fantastically to the challenge of coronavirus. I am sure that Members from all parties have seen the same in their constituencies. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the many individuals who have gone above and beyond this year for their neighbours and their communities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, I will indeed. My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the volunteers in his constituency and the millions of volunteers across the country who have made such an important contribution throughout the pandemic. In my own village of West Harptree, as the restrictions came in in March a note was sent round to every household asking whether people wanted help. It was quite remarkable to see such community spirit. It is a testament to the voluntary spirit and civic mindedness of the British people that hundreds of thousands of Britons volunteered to assist the vulnerable throughout the pandemic. I am sure that that is true in Crewe and Nantwich as well, and that my hon. Friend is right to thank his local volunteers.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): For the first time ever, UNICEF, the UN agency responsible for providing humanitarian aid to children, is having to feed working-class kids in the UK. While children go hungry, a wealthy few enjoy obscene riches—from Tory donors handed billions in dodgy covid contracts to people like the Leader of the House, who is reportedly in line to receive an £800,000 dividend pay-out this year.

Will he give Government time to discuss the need to make him and his super-rich chums pay their fair share, so that we can end the grotesque inequality that scars our society?

Mr Speaker: I do not like to personalise too much in the House. I understand that Members want to get things on the record, but I want to show at least some kind of Christmas spirit at the moment.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is a real scandal that UNICEF should be playing politics in this way. It is meant to be looking after people in the poorest and most deprived countries in the world, where people are starving and there are famines and civil wars, and it makes cheap political points of this kind, giving £25,000 to one council. It is a political stunt of the lowest order.

What have this Government done about child poverty? We are committed to our manifesto pledge to reduce child poverty. We have expanded free school meals to all five to seven-year-olds, benefiting 1.4 million children. We doubled free childcare for eligible working parents and will establish a £1 billion childcare fund, giving parents the support and freedom to look after children. We are spending £400 million of taxpayers' money to support children, families and the most vulnerable over the winter and through 2021. Between 2010 and 2018-19, there were 100,000 fewer children in absolute poverty in this country. This is a record of success of conservatism, and UNICEF should be ashamed of itself.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Last Christmas, Father Christmas came early for me, as I had the honour of being elected the first ever Conservative Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. Twelve months on, I am proud that, while tackling a global health pandemic, we continue to level up, with up to £29 million for rail and bus services in Stoke-on-Trent and £25 million for the Kidsgrove town deal, of which £300,000 has so far gone towards the start of refurbishing and reopening Kidsgrove sports centre. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the people's Government were given a resounding mandate to deliver their manifesto, and whatever challenges we face as a nation, we must honour the promise that we made to the electorate?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his excellent first year in the House and on putting his constituency on the map—it took a Conservative Member to put it on the map. I welcome the Government's commitments to Stoke; it is clear that we are delivering on the promises made to its voters, and we will continue to do so throughout this Parliament.

My hon. Friend raises a crucial point: the 2019 manifesto is the foundation of this Government. It is a bond with our voters and it is incumbent on all Ministers to make sure that is honoured—and we are doing so. From the towns fund to the thousands of new police officers and nurses, a landmark new immigration system, safeguarding the United Kingdom's internal market and, of course, delivering Brexit, we are keeping and will continue to keep our promises as we level up and improve the opportunities for everyone across this country.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Although it is the largest infrastructure project in Europe, we seem to lack any debate on the HS2 programme. That is

[*Matt Western*]

despite its costing a huge amount of public money and despite the fact that the pandemic has changed the way that people will be using rail in the future. The only debate on the matter seems to be in the other place. Earlier this week, a report from the independent National Infrastructure Commission, chaired by Lord Armit, provided an assessment of rail needs for the midlands and the north. It emphasised greater investment in the north specifically and in regional lines. Given the rumours that the eastern leg of HS2 has been cancelled as part of the HS2 project, can we have an urgent debate about the future and viability of the project?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The HS2 Bill is in their lordships' House, so, understandably, that is why the Lords are paying particular attention to it. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to ask for a debate on such an important infrastructure project. It is an enormous amount of taxpayers' money that is being spent. I cannot promise him a debate in Government time, but I imagine that there is widespread interest across the House on this subject, and I should have thought that an application to the Backbench Business Committee would be in order.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Ind): One level playing field on which we might all agree is the similar treatment of similar businesses in terms of Government support during the covid emergency, so may we have a statement in the new year, if not sooner, about the plight of food and drink wholesalers who do not get business rates relief, whereas supermarkets do? That seems to me and many others to be inequitable.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend has raised this point with me before, and it is one that I completely understand and have a degree of sympathy with, although there is a difference with wholesalers between the retailers, and some of them have managed to change their supply customers quite effectively. They also benefit from the other schemes—the furlough scheme, bounce back loans and many other schemes—that the Government have introduced. Although he is right to raise the point, there are things that the Government have done to help that sector.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: The Leader of the House did not answer the question earlier about what the permanent secretary at the Department for Education said this morning. In case he has missed it, I will read it out to him. She said:

“There are conversations going on about exactly how parents and pupils will go back at the beginning of January, but I am afraid I cannot speak to the Committee about that this morning.”

Parents, children and school staff all need to know now what the arrangements are, so can the Education Secretary give a statement to MPs in the House today to clear up this latest confusion and mess?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman: I did answer the question earlier. The Government's policy is that it is important for people to be educated physically and to be back at school. That remains Government policy and has not changed.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): Reflecting on the past 12 months, it occurs to me that many of the difficulties faced by residents and businesses in Aberconwy

are actually reflections of some of the biggest questions that any Government can face. Right now, we are looking at when consent by government reverts to government by consent. We are wrestling even this morning with questions about the UK's place in the world, and we have heard from my right hon. Friend that there are tensions and questions to be asked about the relationship between different layers of government in the Union, so will he consider giving some time in the new year to a general debate on the limits of government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: In the 18th century, there was a debate which I think was called “The powers of the Crown have increased, are increasing and should be reduced”. It is commonplace in this House that we should always jealously guard the powers of this House against the Executive. It is in the nature of government to want power, and it is in the nature of a legislature to ensure that that power is proportionate. My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point, although I would say one thing, which is that all that has happened in relation to the pandemic has continued to be government by consent. It is both remarkable and reassuring that in this country, unlike many others, the need for zealous enforcement has been remarkably low, because we are a country that is governed by consent, and people have complied with the restrictions by their own consent rather than by compulsion.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: For many of the most vulnerable folk in Motherwell and Wishaw, and across the UK, their Post Office card account is their main access to cash. In this Schrödinger's Parliament, I must ask for a Government statement on the managed decline of services provided through post offices, as, if I ask for a debate in Government time, I am unable to take part. Will the Leader of the House fulfil my Christmas wish and allow me, and so many others, to take part in vital debates like this virtually in 2021?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. She has of course made the point about Post Office cards in business questions. I reiterate that I brought forward a motion that would have allowed the extremely clinically vulnerable to participate remotely, and it is deeply unfortunate that it was talked out by the Labour party in cahoots with the SNP.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: May I take this opportunity, Mr Speaker, to wish you and your staff a very merry Christmas and new year—and, in particular, the broadcasters and my Committee staff? I thank them for all they have done to keep Parliament working for those online.

On Saturday, our Education Committee will publish a report on adult skills and lifelong learning. Nine million working-age adults in England have low literacy or numeracy skills, or both, and 6 million adults are not qualified to level 2—equivalent to GCSE level. Following the publication of the Committee's report, can we have an urgent debate on our plan for a revolution in adult skills and lifelong learning?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Those figures are absolutely shocking—that 9 million working-age adults in England have low literacy or numeracy. I therefore very much welcome the work that my right hon. Friend and his Committee have been doing.

Investment in skills is vital to giving people the opportunity to improve their skills, and to change their skills, to advance into higher-wage employment, and to support adults who will need to retrain at different points throughout their lives. Starting next year, the Government are spending £2.5 billion of taxpayers' money—£3 billion when including Barnett consequentials—on the national skills fund. This is a significant amount of money that has the potential to deliver new opportunities to generations of adults who may previously have been left behind. From April 2021, we will be supporting any adult aged 24 and over who wants to achieve their first full level 3 qualification—broadly equivalent to two A-levels—or a technical certificate or diploma, with access to nearly 400 fully funded courses. This will be the key in reducing that 9 million number.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I know the Leader of the House will be as concerned as I am about the increasing numbers of people who deem themselves to be vaccine-hesitant. Only today, *The Times* says that there has been a 4% increase in the number of people in the UK saying that they are concerned about taking the vaccine. I have raised many times with him, with the Health Secretary and with the Cabinet Office the need for a Government programme on key messaging to tell people that the vaccine is safe, as I know he agrees it is. Could he arrange for one of the Departments of State to make a statement on what the plan is to tackle the anti-vaxxers to ensure that people who are concerned about vaccines get their questions answered and are not exploited for the profits of anti-vaxxers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises a point of the greatest importance. We have to win the argument and reassure people that the vaccine is safe. Part of that will be leading by example. I am absolutely delighted—I cannot tell you how pleased I am—that my mother is getting the vaccine on Saturday. For those of us who have older parents, it is a real reassurance that they are going to be vaccinated. But it also shows that I, at least, am genuinely confident, because I would not be encouraging my mother to have the vaccine if I did not think it was completely safe. We also, less anecdotally, need to look at the statistics, the risks and the reports. The risks are tiny and the benefits are overwhelming, both to the individual and to society at large. The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point. We have a great job to do, all of us, in leading the way and making the argument about why vaccines are safe, not a risk, and how they open up the possibility of life getting back to normal.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Earlier this week, the Government published their energy White Paper, whose policies are crucial to my constituency. As my right hon. Friend knows, we have major facilities for serving the offshore renewable sector. Page 57 of the White Paper refers specifically to the revival of the port of Grimsby, part of which falls in my constituency. The Secretary of State made a statement earlier this week, but because of the importance of the policies in the White Paper, could the Leader of the House find time for a full-scale debate on this?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Thanks to my hon. Friend's efficient campaigning, I think all Government policy is now devoted to improving the opportunities in Cleethorpes, and that is only right. I am glad to say that our plans to

build back greener see an increased ambition of 40 GW of energy from offshore wind by 2030 and a new target for floating offshore wind to deliver 1 GW of energy by 2030, supporting up to 60,000 jobs. The location of the port of Grimsby close to the majority of the UK's offshore wind farm developments presents a major opportunity for the port and the town, with around £10 million due to be invested. The port is now recognised as the centre for operations and maintenance services for the offshore wind farms, and I hope that my hon. Friend will soon be able to see the fruits of these efforts. The people of Cleethorpes and Grimsby should be so pleased that they have such a strong advocate in this House who always ensures that Cleethorpes and Grimsby are at the forefront of Her Majesty's Government's mind.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): A happy Christmas to you and all your staff, Mr Speaker, as well as to my constituents in York Central. Many of my constituents and businesses are incredibly worried. Six deadlines have passed, with the final one in just two weeks' time, and we still do not know the contents of this possible deal. In the light of that, does the Leader of the House not agree that it would be a contempt of this Parliament and our constituents if someone from the Cabinet did not come to the House to make an urgent statement before the close of business today to say exactly what point the talks are at and what the contents of the talks are, so that my constituents can start planning for their futures in just two weeks' time?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We have just had Cabinet Office questions, when there would have been an opportunity to raise questions about this, but the negotiations are, as everybody knows, not yet finalised. When they are finalised, that will be the right time to make a statement. It is also worth bearing in mind that there will be changes regardless of whether there is a free trade agreement between the UK and the European Union, and businesses should be getting ready for those changes irrespective of whether anything is agreed in the next few days.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): This year, pressure on local mental health services has increased tenfold, with covid-19 bringing local challenges and new challenges. Having raised this issue with the Government on numerous occasions, I was delighted to welcome a record £15 million for mental health services in Stoke-on-Trent, which will allow Harplands Hospital in my constituency to benefit from a new crisis care centre and detoxification suite. Will the Leader of the House make parliamentary time available to discuss investment in local health services in communities across the UK, following the unprecedented impact of covid-19?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue, and I am glad that mental health services in her constituency are being fully supported. It is vital that we do not forget the impact that this pandemic has had on people's mental health. Overall mental health funding increased to £13.3 billion in 2019-20. The Government have provided £10.2 million of additional funding for mental health charities during this crisis, including £1 million donated to charities across the country, inspired by ITV's "Help our Helplines" campaign. I am aware that the subject was debated in Westminster Hall on 8 October.

[*Mr Rees-Mogg*]

My hon. Friend may wish to apply for an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate in the usual way, but this is of fundamental importance and it is at the forefront of the Government's thinking.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) [V]: The ports infrastructure funding announced yesterday distributes £194 million. Rightly or wrongly, our Welsh ports are getting just £2.25 million, and Holyhead, the second busiest roll-on roll-off port in the UK, gets less than £0.25 million. Given this experience, may we have an early statement on having fair, sensible and readily understandable principles behind investing public money under the Government's forthcoming shared prosperity fund?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Obviously all spending of Government money has to be scrutinised extremely carefully. The ports fund is there to help ports across the country to improve their capacity and flow. It will be allocated in a way that is fair to all the ports involved. I know the hon. Gentleman is a great campaigner for his local port, and if he wanted to raise the matter in an Adjournment debate, I think that would be a suitable next step.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: It is apparent from the Leader of the House's announcement of the business that if we do get a deal with the EU, there will be very little time for this House to consider it. Will he at least ensure that the Select Committee established to scrutinise the future relationship with the EU can scrutinise that deal and report to the House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I know what the question was, because my hon. Friend spoke to me about it yesterday, which is an advantage, given the weakness of the connection just then. I am aware of his concerns about the Committee on the Future Relationship with the European Union winding up in early January, but there is of course also the European Scrutiny Committee. It might be a very good step if the two Chairmen discussed with each other the issues that came out of any agreement that may be made. As there is a Committee, it may well be able to learn from the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). The Chairman of the future relationship Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) may have a lot of shared interests that they can exchange with each other.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Yesterday, an inquest found that air pollution was the cause of death for nine-year-old Ella Kissi-Debrah, who lived just 30 yards from the busy London south circular and was admitted to hospital 30 times in three years for air pollution-induced asthma attacks before she ultimately died. Therefore, for Ella's sake and in the light of this verdict, will the Leader of the House urge the Government to ensure that legally binding World Health Organisation air quality limits are not just included in the Environment Bill but enforced from 2021 and not delayed, so that tens of thousands more children are not put at unnecessary risk, but have the protection of the law? It could be called Ella's law, following her tragic death and this historic verdict.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I know that the thoughts of the House remain with Ella's family and friends, and I think it is best if I reiterate what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday. Our understanding of the major public health risk posed by air pollution has improved significantly over recent years, and we are always working to raise awareness among the public and health professionals. Air quality has improved significantly over recent decades. We are continuing to take urgent action to curb the effect of air pollution on communities across England through our ambitious clean air strategy and landmark Environment Bill and the delivery of our £3.8 billion plan to clean up transport and tackle nitrogen dioxide pollution. We are going further in protecting communities from air pollution—in particular, fine particulate air pollution, which we know is particularly harmful to people's health—through our landmark Environment Bill, where we are setting ambitious new air quality targets with the prime focus on reducing public health impacts. I will add that one of the great scandals of modern politics was the encouragement of diesel engines with the particulate and nitrous oxide emissions that they were giving out, which I am afraid is a scandal that long predates this Government.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The excellent Children's Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), has spoken of a "family-shaped gap at the heart of national policy", so will the Leader of the House rejoice with me at the good news that the Government are to fund a new national centre for family hubs to support local communities across the country to set up such hubs locally? Will he encourage every Member of Parliament to find out more from the Family Hubs Network about how they can champion a family hub in their constituency, perhaps by holding family hubs fairs, to help close that family-shaped gap in their area?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend, as so often, is absolutely right. I do indeed rejoice that family is being put at the centre of public life. The Department for Education has announced it will be launching a procurement for a national centre for family hubs, whose role would be to champion family hubs and to work with councils to develop and spread best practice, and an evaluation innovation fund to build the evidence base on integrated family service models. I think my hon. Friend's idea that we should all go out and have family hubs and support family hubs is a very good one. I do my bit: I have six children, so my support for the family is unstinting.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Mr Speaker, may I take this opportunity to wish you and the House staff a merry Christmas? For a number of my constituents, this Christmas will not be a merry one, because they are living in properties that still have unsafe cladding. They are having to face enormous costs because of the waking watch. They will not have a good Christmas, so can we please, in 2021, have an urgent debate on this really important issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises a point that the Government have been tackling. We have brought forward the most significant building safety reforms in nearly 40 years. We are providing £1.6 billion to speed up the removal of unsafe cladding, making homes safer sooner.

Almost 80% of buildings with dangerous Grenfell-style cladding have had it removed or are in the process of doing so, and that rises to 97% in the social housing sector. More than 100 buildings have started remediation on site in 2020 so far, despite the backdrop of the global pandemic, and that is more than in the whole of 2019. We are clear that works to remove unsafe ACM cladding must be completed by the end of 2021. I hope this will be some reassurance to the hon. Lady's constituents.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that, as the roll-out of the vaccine progresses, he will make Government time available to ensure that Members of this House are able to monitor and scrutinise the process and ensure that it is effectively reaching all of our constituencies?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has gone to great lengths to keep this House updated throughout the pandemic, and there will be a statement later from the Department on the latest state of affairs, when these issues can be raised. It is worth saying that, last week, we took a huge step forward in our collective fight against coronavirus, rolling out an initial 800,000 doses of the approved Pfizer vaccine, which is a considerable achievement. We have done remarkably well against our European friends. I notice that the Germans are getting a little bit antsy because we are ahead of them, and that is because we have a very efficient regulator.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) [V]: We are seeing the emergence of a very worrying pattern of sports and leisure facilities in areas with the biggest pre-existing health inequalities also being at the greatest risk of closure due to the impact of covid. In Newcastle upon Tyne North, we are very concerned about the future of West Denton pool, which closed when lockdown first began in March and has not yet reopened. It is vital that those living in the outer west of Newcastle can fulfil their new year health resolutions and that their children can learn to swim, like those anywhere else. Can we have a debate in Government time on how we prevent this pandemic from deepening pre-existing health inequalities and ensure that facilities such as West Denton pool can reopen once again and become hives in our community?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government have provided enormous funds for local authorities that help them to pay for the services they ought to be providing, including £4.6 billion across the country of funding that is not ring-fenced, which local councils can use as they see fit. I encourage the hon. Lady to lobby her local council to try to ensure these facilities are available.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): Can we have a debate on the way we can use nature-based solutions to tackle climate change? I want to highlight the efforts to restore the Peak district's beautiful moorlands. Raising the water table by restoring peat bogs has many benefits. It increases carbon capture to tackle climate change, it reduces the risk of fire and flooding, it improves water quality and it also enhances biodiversity. It really is a no-brainer, and I am proud to have helped secure a significant increase in funding for these vital local projects.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Indeed, we know that better management of our peatlands can improve biodiversity, carbon storage and

flood protection. We have always been clear about the need to phase out rotational burning of protected blanket bog, and we are looking at how legislation could achieve this. We have already allocated £10 million over the last three financial years that will restore over 16,000 acres of peatland. We have committed to restoring a further 85,000 acres of peatland as part of the new £640 million nature for climate fund, announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor during the most recent Budget. Later this year, we will be publishing an England peat strategy to manage, protect and restore our peatlands so that they deliver benefits for climate and for nature.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I echo all the thanks and good wishes to everyone who has kept us safe this year.

I am increasingly concerned about how the Leader of the House defines and understands the parliamentary sovereignty for which he has campaigned for so long. He knows, first of all, that if a motion like the one on virtual participation gets talked out, that means the House wants more time to discuss it, and as Leader of the House, he should be providing that time. Now it seems that he wants to bring us back on a recall to bounce through the biggest decision about our future relationship with Europe, which will define that relationship for decades to come. This morning, he has issued guidance about how Members of Parliament should travel safely under the covid restrictions, precisely because he recognises the risks that must be associated with it. The solution to all this is, as with the Christmas lights on a tree, to switch back on the remote participation that we were able to use earlier in the year.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman asks for things to be switched back on, but we have to be here to do our job properly. It seems to me that under any definition, it is not parliamentary sovereignty when members of his flock wander up to the Table, lift up the Mace and prance about the Chamber with it because they are a bit crotchety. That was one of the most ridiculous sights in this House in recent years. I thought that on behalf of the SNP, the hon. Gentleman, who is a fine parliamentarian, was going to stand up and apologise for that really silly, childish, babyish display yesterday, rather than complaining that we are going to have to do our job and our duty and come in and vote on important matters of public business.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Individuals are being listed as covid fatalities if they die within 28 days of testing positive, even when the main reason for their passing was another long-term health condition. That is totally wrong, for two reasons. First, on a national level, it is skewing our fatality figures, providing inaccurate data upon which decisions are based. Secondly, it means that families of deceased former mineworkers are receiving inaccurate post-mortems and therefore missing out on the compensation that is owed to them. This is causing considerable hardship and distress to those families. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister to come to the House to make a statement after our return in January?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The second point that my hon. Friend raises is of the utmost importance. In a constituency such as his—and indeed my own, where there is a former mining community—this must be a matter of the greatest local concern. I assure him that I will pass

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

this matter on to my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary immediately after these proceedings, because my hon. Friend has raised a fundamentally important point and he is right to seek redress of grievance.

Mr Speaker: Let us head over to Wales with Kevin Brennan. Can I just say that there is a dress code for Members who are not in the Chamber as well as those who are?

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) [V]: I thank the shadow Leader of the House for mentioning Luke Symons, who is still being held captive by the Houthis in Yemen. May I press the Leader of the House to ensure that his colleagues in the Foreign Office are doing all they can to secure his release?

My constituent Bailey Williams turns 19 this week. He suffers from multiple seizures, except when controlled by medical cannabis. He can get hold of his medicine, but many children and young people in the same position cannot, because the Department of Health and Social Care has confirmed that after 31 December it will be impossible to import that important medicine from the Netherlands. May we have an urgent statement from the Department of Health and Social Care, in writing if necessary, to indicate what it thinks families who are faced with the prospect of their children losing their vital medicine should do?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will indeed take up the case of Luke Symons with my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary after business questions, as I do every week.

The Government obviously sympathise with those families who are dealing so courageously with challenging conditions, particularly in their children. Two licensed cannabis-based medicines have been made available for prescription on the NHS, following clearly demonstrated evidence of their safety and their clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which is rightly independent of Government, has said that there is a clear need for more evidence to support routine prescribing and funding for unlicensed cannabis-based products. As regards the supply of drugs to this country, a great deal of planning has been done to ensure that that supply will not be disrupted.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): We all know that the true way we can level up is through education, so I was horrified to read in the press recently that, in my borough of Sandwell, attendance rates of 37% had been recorded in some instances. I represent some of the areas with the highest rates of child poverty in the west midlands. May we have a debate in Government time about how we can ensure that our children can get into school and stay in school and that we support education, particularly in areas such as Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton, which suffer from some of the highest rates of child deprivation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a really serious point. It is vital to their educational progress, wellbeing and wider development that children and young people attend school. It is appalling to hear about the attendance record at schools in his constituency—37% is an atrociously low figure. We must do all we can to reverse this, so that children in West Bromwich can take advantage of the opportunities available to them. Approximately 99% of schools have been open each week since the start of the term, and it is important that schools continue to remain open, despite the restrictions brought about by the pandemic. I shall pass on my hon. Friend's concerns to the Secretary of State for Education, but it is primarily a local authority matter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Leader of the House, you, Mr Speaker, and other right hon. and hon. Members know that Christmas is very much a family time, but I wish to highlight a place where that will not happen. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary to update the House at the earliest opportunity on the urgent situation in Nigeria, in particular the kidnapping on 12 December of more than 300 schoolboys in the north-west state of Katsina and what specifically Her Majesty's Government are doing to support efforts to secure their safe release? I would be grateful if we could get them home for Christmas, but we had better get them home some time in the new year.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by wishing the hon. Gentleman a very happy Christmas? I have a feeling that he is the only Member of this House who is disappointed that I have announced the recess dates, and would prefer that we were sitting on Christmas Day itself, which would be the best way he could celebrate. [Interruption.] Well, of course one goes to church first, and then comes into the House. I do wish him and all his family a very happy Christmas.

The hon. Gentleman has raised a deeply concerning subject—the reports of armed men attacking a secondary school in Katsina in north-west Nigeria and abducting over 300 children. Violence against children studying in school is a despicable act. To go back to an earlier question, one does wonder whether UNICEF might think a bit more about this rather than faffing around in England. The Minister for Africa tweeted on 14 December expressing our concern, and we are monitoring the situation closely. The UK is providing—this is important—a comprehensive package of support for Nigeria to help tackle insecurity challenges, including serious and organised crime and terrorism, but there is clearly a great deal more to do. Over Christmas, both the hon. Gentleman and I will remember those children in our prayers.

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.

11.42 am

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update

11.45 am

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): As we enter the coldest months, we must be vigilant and keep this virus under control. Yesterday, 25,161 cases were reported and there are 18,038 people in hospital with coronavirus in the UK. We must keep suppressing this virus. This is not just a matter for the Government or this House; it is a matter for every single person. These are always the most difficult months for people's health and for the NHS. Especially with the vaccine already here, we must be cautious as we accelerate the vaccine deployment as per the winter plan. We have come so far—we must not blow it now.

When we reintroduced the tiered system, we resolved to review the data in each area every two weeks. The sophisticated covid surveillance system we now have in place means we can act swiftly and decisively when necessary. At the weekend, we held an emergency review for London, Essex and parts of Hertfordshire where cases are accelerating fast. Yesterday, we held the first full formal review. I must report to the House that across the world cases are rising once more. In Europe, restrictions are being reintroduced. In America, case rates have accelerated. In Japan, cases are rising once again. Yesterday, the Welsh Government made the decision to tighten restrictions across the whole of Wales. No one wants tougher restrictions any longer than necessary, but where they are necessary, we must put them in place to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed and to protect life. Even in a normal year, this is the busiest time for the NHS. As Chris Hobson, chief executive of NHS Providers, reminded us this morning:

“controlling infection rates is about limiting patient harm”.

This is a moment when we act with caution.

In the south-east of England, cases are up 46% in the last week. Hospital admissions are up by more than a third. In the east of England, cases are up two thirds in the last week and hospital admissions are up by nearly half. It is therefore necessary to apply tier 3 measures across a much wider area of the east and south-east of England, including Bedfordshire; Buckinghamshire; Berkshire; Peterborough; the whole of Hertfordshire; Surrey with the exception of Waverley; Hastings and Rother, on the Kent border of East Sussex; and Portsmouth, Gosport and Havant in Hampshire. These changes will take effect from one minute past midnight on Saturday morning.

I know that tier 3 measures are tough, but the best way for everyone to get out of them is to pull together and not just follow the rules but do everything they possibly can to stop the spread of the virus. Where we have seen places get the virus under control and come out of tier 3, it is because everybody has taken responsibility on themselves to make that happen. We have seen case rates fall across large parts of England. I know that many places in tier 3 have seen their rates reduce. In most places, I have to tell you, Mr Speaker, we are not quite there yet and the pressures on the NHS remain.

However, we are able to move some place down a tier. We assess these decisions according to the five published indicators: case rates; case rates among the over-60s; test positivity; rates of change; and hospital pressure. Today, I am placing in the House of Commons Library an assessment of each area and publishing the data on

which we make these decisions. For the vast majority of places currently in tier 3, we are not making a change today. However, I am pleased to say that some places can go down a tier. In Bristol and north Somerset, rates have come down from 432 per 100,000 to 121 and falling. I can therefore announce that Bristol and north Somerset will come out of tier 3 and into tier 2 on Saturday. Rates in Herefordshire have also come down, to 45 in 100,000, and are falling, and we can therefore bring Herefordshire out of tier 2 and into tier 1.

I want to pay tribute to everyone who has been doing the right thing and getting rates down. Whether or not their area has come down a tier today, it is so vital that everyone sticks at it and does the right thing, especially over this Christmas period. It is important to remember that this can be a silent disease. One in three people with the disease have no symptoms but can still pass it on. Everyone therefore has a personal responsibility to play their part in keeping this pandemic under control. I know that other areas are so eager to move down the tiers, and the best thing we can all do is act with responsibility to get the virus under control.

These restrictions are, thankfully, not the only tool we have now to fight this disease. We are further expanding our testing programme, and later today the Education Secretary will set out further action on school testing in the new year; and, of course, the vaccine roll-out is accelerating. I can update the House by saying that over 200 vaccination sites are now open, in all parts of the UK, with more opening their doors and bringing hope to communities over the coming days. I know that everyone will be as thrilled as I am every time they are contacted by a friend or loved one who has been getting the jab. It was a wonderful sight to see the global map of vaccine deployment, with the UK proudly standing out as the site of the first vaccinations. It is a huge logistical challenge, but the vaccine offers us promise of a better year ahead. Until the great endeavour of vaccine deployment reaches enough people to make this country safe, we must keep doing what it takes to protect our NHS and protect those we love. That means all of us doing our bit, following the rules and taking personal responsibility to help contain the spread of the virus, so that we can get through this safely, together. I commend this statement to the House.

11.51 am

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. These past 12 months have seen covid spread with speed and severity. More than 65,000 people have died in the United Kingdom, at least 620 of them health and care workers making the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty. More than 240,000 people have been treated in hospital with the disease, and, as he reminded us, what gives this virus such lethal advantage is that people who appear healthy can go about their lives unaware that they are transmitting the virus to others. So, of course, we accept and understand why he has had to move areas into higher tiers today, even though this means tens of millions of people across England are now living under the toughest restrictions, and we are grateful that he is placing in the Library details on each of our local authority areas.

However, two weeks ago the Secretary of State did say that we had the virus “under control”, and:

“We can't risk letting cases rise again, especially into Christmas”.

[Jonathan Ashworth]

I am afraid that that is exactly what is now happening, is it not? Yesterday, England reported more than 23,000 cases, which is the highest number in a month. Hospital admissions on 14 December were the highest since 16 April, and the number of people in hospital with covid is now at its highest since 22 April. The number has risen by 20% since the end of lockdown. If it goes up by another 20%, we are back at the same peak we saw in April.

These numbers should be sounding all the alarm bells there are, which is why clinicians are pleading with the Secretary of State to put robust arrangements in place to keep people safe through Christmas. We saw in Canada and in the United States huge spikes in infections following Thanksgiving. This is not about cancelling Christmas—Santa will still deliver his presents—but is the Secretary of State really telling us that allowing indoor mixing of three households across regions and generations for five days is sensible, given that the virus is raging with such ferocity at the moment? The devastating tragedy is that those who will be most impacted by the virus spreading through the easing are those who will be at the front of the queue for the vaccine in the next month or two, so will he look again at the Christmas arrangements?

On vaccination, more than 130,000 have been vaccinated in the first week—that is a good thing, and we celebrate it and congratulate all involved—but to vaccinate every older person, vulnerable person and key worker by Easter, we will need to do something like double that every day. The National Audit Office this week said that £11.7 billion for the programme will be needed alongside 46,000 extra staff, so how much is allocated to the vaccine programme at the moment? How many staff are being taken on and trained to support the vaccination programme? When will we see the mass vaccination centres opened in our constituencies?

There have also been warnings today about the vaccine roll-out in primary care taking longer than planned, because existing software systems keep crashing, the system does not alert GPs if a patient on their lists has already had it in hospital, and GPs are forced to turn to pen and paper for data capture. When will there be a national call and recall system for GPs, and why was it not ready for the roll-out this week?

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned that the Secretary of State for Education is to make a statement on schools. I do not know whether that means he is coming to the House or not, but with schools going back in January, can he provide some clarity around testing in schools? There is some speculation that the opening of schools will be delayed by a week in January. Can he give us an update on what is happening on that front?

Finally, this has been a dismal year for all of us, but our national health service workers and our care workers have, as always, done us proud, so I put on record my thanks to all of them; many will be working through the Christmas and new year period. I also thank all those working on the response to covid, including the right hon. Gentleman's departmental officials, our medical science community and our public health teams. With that, I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, all working in the House and, indeed, the Secretary of State a safe Christmas and a happy new year.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman rightly asked about the arrangements in place for Christmas, which the Prime Minister set out very clearly yesterday. Christmas is a very special time of year and that is why we have put in the arrangements that we have. It is a matter of people's personal responsibility to ensure that they act and see their loved ones in a way that is safe and careful. I think people understand that, and, what is more, I think people will abide by it. We know that it is safer to see older people, especially if they are over 70 or clinically extremely vulnerable, if we have taken the care to reduce social contact beforehand. We also know that, after Christmas, being able to reduce social contact will be important for keeping this under control.

I think that aspect of personal responsibility is important. Sometimes in this House it feels to me that the debate is suggesting that, if we do not, in Government, put in place concrete rules, nobody will take any action. Actually, it is down to individuals—each and every one of us—to take responsibility for our actions, within the rules, of course, but also being cautious. This is a massive team effort and my experience of the last few months is that when a community has come together to get case rates down, that is when it has happened and when it has worked. Even with the rules in place, it is only when the community essentially comes together to get this under control that we see cases coming down along with the pressure on the NHS. I regret having to take the action that we have to take. I deem it necessary, and there is a strong view right across Government that these actions are necessary, but I also plead that personal responsibility is absolutely central to how we as a society should respond to this pandemic.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the mass vaccination roll-out. The mass vaccination sites are appropriate for the Oxford—AstraZeneca vaccine, should that come through and be approved by the regulator, so it will be some weeks before we see those rolled out. However, we are every day having more and more primary care sites coming on board with the roll-out of the Pfizer vaccine, and it is very good to see that happening. I expect the numbers that are vaccinated to accelerate. The team have made a very good start and there is a long way further to go.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the data systems. They have largely been working very effectively. Of course, any very large logistical roll-out like this has niggles, but they are small and have been brilliantly dealt with locally on the ground.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the roll-out of testing in schools. As I say, the Education Secretary will set out more details on offering all secondary schools, colleges, special schools and alternative provision settings the help, support and facilities to test as many secondary-age and further education students as possible, as they resume their education in January. I thank in advance all the teachers and support staff in schools for their work; no doubt they will lean in and support this task to ensure that school return can proceed as safely as possible.

Finally, I echo the hon. Gentleman's words and wish him a happy and safe Christmas. I look forward very much to seeing him again in January.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con) [V]: In the past week, I have received unexpectedly joyful emails from residents of South West Surrey who have been

among the first in the world to receive a clinically approved vaccine for coronavirus. I thank my right hon. Friend for that early Christmas present. I also thank him for the energy, for the endless media rounds and for the dedication that he has shown in the past year, which must have been one of the toughest imaginable for a Health Secretary. I am also grateful that Waverley has been excluded from the Surrey-wide move to tier 3, in recognition of our lower infection rates, although we will remain vigilant.

I want to ask my right hon. Friend about Christmas, just a week away. Of course personal responsibility matters, but, in a pandemic, so does clarity. Irrespective of the law or the regulations, should we or should we not have indoor social gatherings with elderly and vulnerable family members?

Matt Hancock: People should act with great caution in this pandemic, because doing so protects them, protects their families and protects their loved ones. We have set out what the rules are, but they are not a limit up to which we should all push. We can all act within those rules to limit the spread, by reducing social contact in the days up to meeting a family member who may be, for instance, over 70—or any other family member. It is reasonable and responsible to take that sort of action.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for what he said about the vaccine roll-out. I have been cheered by the messages I get from constituents and others now that they are receiving the vaccine. We just have to ensure that we get the deployment out as fast as the vaccine can reasonably be produced and as fast as the NHS can deploy it, so that we get people the safety of that vaccine and so that we can get through this and out of this as soon as possible.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is important that the festive days ahead do not become a five-day mass get-together. Therefore, we should use as little of the flexibility as possible, spread over several days, while ensuring that no one is facing Christmas alone. The concerns of medical professionals that the Christmas covid restriction relaxation will cost lives are not to be dismissed lightly. Does the Secretary of State agree that if people are to form a bubble, it should be kept as small as possible? If so, would it not be better to follow the Scottish approach, which sets a strict maximum limit on the numbers, up to eight people from three households, rather than the potentially unlimited numbers permitted currently in English bubbles?

Matt Hancock: This has been an incredibly difficult year for so many people and so many families. The fixed numerical limits place a particular burden on very large families. We have taken, I think, a balanced and right approach, but while I understand the urge for caution—of course I understand that, from my NHS colleagues and others—I also understand that people want to see their children and their loved ones. Christmas is an important time of the year, and we have to find a balance.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I join my right hon. Friend in wishing NHS staff and everyone involved in this crisis a happy Christmas. Will he join me in wishing Essex County Council and local authorities in Essex a happy Christmas for what they have contributed to the test, track and trace operation since NHS Test and Trace started to share data much more quickly with local authorities? I can report to him

that most districts have started door-knocking to follow up the contacts of cases, and the complete case contact rates are now around 87% and 90% respectively. Will he join me in congratulating the local authorities of Essex on this tremendous effort?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am grinning because I think this is the first time in the dozens and dozens of statements I have made this year when the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) has not mentioned track and trace. I will tell you why, Madam Deputy Speaker: the latest statistics show that where communications were available, 96.6% of people were reached and told to self-isolate. That is because of the huge improvements in contact tracing and testing that have been delivered this year—[HON. MEMBERS: “By local authorities.”] Including, of course, by local authority partners, but also by the brilliant national NHS Test and Trace system, which we should all congratulate. Getting those contact rates—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. This is not a moment for shouting. Listen to the Secretary of State.

Matt Hancock: I think the moment when we see contact rates of more than 90% should be one where everybody comes together and says thank you and well done to everybody at NHS Test and Trace and all their partners, whether they are in the public sector or are the brilliant private sector partners that we all support.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab) [V]: Happy Christmas to you and yours, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Secretary of State will know the significant effect that the pandemic has had on NHS dentistry. There is a backlog of more than 19 million appointments. It is therefore shocking and unacceptable that NHS England has just decided to impose a new activity target on dentists in England, which many simply will not be able to meet under new covid restrictions. NHS England's own data show that nearly 60% of dental practices will be hit by severe financial penalties. Dentists will now need to prioritise check-ups rather than dealing with the backlog of patients needing treatment while others may be forced to close entirely—a straight choice between staying financially liable and treating those in pain with more complex problems. Will the Secretary of State reverse this decision, which threatens patient safety and access and could lead to the demise of NHS dentistry as we know it?

Matt Hancock: I am very glad to be able to reassure the hon. Lady that the agreement that has been reached with the dentists is all about ensuring that while we support our NHS dentists we see them do as much as they can to look after people and help them get the treatments they need. This is a good, balanced programme and I am sure it will be implemented well by the dentists.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): May I say how delighted I am that North Somerset is moving down into tier 2, which is just reward for the efforts of my constituents and the whole community and also offers great potential help for our hospitality industry as we go into the Christmas period? On the question of balance, I completely agree with my right hon. Friend that we have to consider not just the number of people and the number of households but the age and vulnerability

[Dr Liam Fox]

of those who are meeting. May I also say, echoing the words of my colleague, that I wish a very happy Christmas to my right hon. Friend and his team of Ministers, who have done the most difficult job imaginable in a rather exceptional way? I hope—although without much expectation—that they will get some break over the Christmas period.

Matt Hancock: The people of North Somerset, whom my right hon. Friend represents, and those of nearby Weston-super-Mare have done a remarkable job of bringing the case rates down to 120 for every 100,000. I am very pleased that we are able to take North Somerset out of tier 3 into tier 2. I would also say to everybody that the point about personal responsibility that my hon. Friend stressed and that I strongly agree with still applies. Coming out of a tier makes life easier, of course—we do not want the tiers in place any longer than is absolutely necessary—but it is still on everyone in North Somerset, as well as in Bristol and Herefordshire, which have also come down, to do their bit and keep those case rates down.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab) [V]: The lead-up to Christmas is the busiest period for hospitality businesses, with some pubs in my constituency making up to a quarter of their annual profits, which are now lost. If measures to control the virus are to be effective, they must go hand in hand with proper business support. To protect lives and livelihoods, what will the Secretary of State do to ensure that businesses forming the backbone of my communities in Hull get the financial support they desperately need?

Matt Hancock: I feel gratitude to everyone in Hull for the work they have done to get case rates down as far as they have. Hull has done well, along with the rest of the Humber area, but we are not quite there yet. We are providing the support that comes with being part of tier 3, and we have put record sums in to support hospitality, but I appreciate that this is tough, especially in the run-up to Christmas. I can commit to keep working with the hon. Gentleman and other colleagues across Hull, the Humber and other areas in tier 3 to do everything we can to get hospitality open again.

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) [V]: I pay tribute to the work of Staffordshire County Council in rolling out rapid, large-scale asymptomatic community testing in my constituency of Burton and Uttoxeter. The director of health has raised a number of concerns with the Department about the lack of clarity over funding for those tests. Will my right hon. Friend review the three letters that have been sent to his Department on that issue, to provide the clarity that is urgently needed to allow this testing to continue?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I will get on to it right away. I am really glad that Staffordshire has worked hard on getting this community testing going. Stoke-on-Trent was one of the first places in the country to get going on it, and now we have spread it out wider in Staffs. I will pick up the point that my hon. Friend raises and get back to her straight away.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Secretary of State tells us about personal responsibility. Does he recognise that he has a responsibility to be

honest with the public about what is happening? This week, Whipps Cross Hospital had to turn away ambulances because the ICU was full as a direct result of the rising covid infections in our local community, and the hospital had to move to early discharge of patients. He says that he is publishing data. Will he commit to publishing real-time data about A&E “firebreaks”, ICU capacity and what planned surgeries have been cancelled by hospitals, so that the public can see the truth about why and how we need to protect the NHS and what impact it has on their health outcomes?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about the impact of the virus on the NHS in her part of the world in north-east London. Whipps Cross Hospital is under significant pressure. The case rate in her Waltham Forest local authority is 431 per 100,000. We have to work together to get the cases down, especially in east London, where they are very significant. We publish a huge amount of data on hospital admissions and the impact on the NHS, and I am publishing further data on this today and putting it in the Library of the House.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I am glad to learn that three areas are coming down a tier. That is vital for compliance, because the general public need to see that if they follow the rules and get their cases under control, there will be a pay-off. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what is important is complying with existing restrictions, rather than ever more severe restrictions, and that it is critical that we take the public, including the young, with us?

Matt Hancock: I agree with every word that my hon. Friend has just said. I strongly agree that the best way to get out of tier 3 is by everybody coming together to comply with the restrictions—and not just to comply with them because they are the law but to take responsibility to ensure that we do not spread the virus, which each one of us can do unwittingly because of its asymptomatic nature. I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for the message that it sends: we can get areas out of tier 3 and we can get areas out of tier 2 and into tier 1, but we all have to work at it.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I asked the Secretary of State, via a written question, what estimate his Department had made of the proportion of the population not registered with a GP, to which the answer was:

“No such estimate has been made.”

I found that concerning, given how important GPs are to the roll-out of the covid-19 vaccine, not least for vulnerable populations such as the homeless and those who move around a lot. Will the Secretary of State please explain what plans and provisions are being made to ensure that the vaccine is available to those who are not registered with GPs?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point. It does not matter whether or not somebody is registered with anybody, they can still spread the disease. The reason for the answer that she was given is that we have to try to get the vaccination programme out to everybody, no matter what their status. There are people who do not have any status in paperwork at all, and we need to make sure that we support the roll-out to them as well. We are working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local

Government, which is best placed, along with local authorities, to make sure that the vaccination programme reaches anybody who fulfils the criteria set out by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I welcome the fact that Gloucestershire is remaining in tier 2, and thank the Secretary of State for his engagement with me and my Gloucestershire colleagues this week—it was very much appreciated, and it was very much a team effort to get to where we are. May I press him a little on what he said about vaccines? Will he confirm that the data that is going to be published from next week will have enough detail in it that we will be able to see clearly the vaccination roll-out by age and by area? Will he set out, early on when we return in January, the Government's thinking about how far the vaccination programme needs to have gone and the level of risk that we will have reduced for the country such that we can start to release the restrictions that are so burdensome on our population?

Matt Hancock: Yes. We are committed to setting out weekly updates on the vaccination programme—we released the first data yesterday, on the 137,000 number—and increasingly with the sorts of breakdowns that my right hon. Friend asks for, as more and more groups are reached. He asked for the calculus in terms of the proportion of the population that needs to be protected in order that we are able to bring down restrictions, and that is exactly how we are thinking about the next phase. We do not yet know the impact of the vaccine on transmission, so we cannot yet have a concrete answer to his question, but it is precisely the question that we are asking. We should know much more within the next few weeks.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Recent studies have shown that vaccine hesitancy is highest among the black, Asian and minority ethnic community and low-income groups, and there is a real fear that these groups are being deliberately targeted with misinformation. Will the Secretary of State tell us how his Department is going to counter that so that people can make informed choices, and to avoid covid health disparities going forward?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue. In fact, I was talking about the vaccination programme to the SNP Cabinet Secretary for Health only this morning, because making sure that we reach all those who need vaccinations, according to clinical need, is critical, but we also need then to persuade them to take the vaccine. There is a huge amount of work on tackling misinformation. The most important thing is to have the positive information out there. I thank all those who have gone public about their vaccine so far—we all saw the wonderful photograph of Sir Ian McKellen, and I thank Prue Leith, who went public with her vaccination. It is absolutely terrific to see people celebrating the fact that they are being vaccinated and therefore encouraging other people to do the same.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): This statement will be greeted with dismay in Greater Manchester, where we have had severe restrictions for nine months and where rates in nine of the 10 boroughs are below the national average. My constituents have

behaved responsibly and our rates are lower than those in neighbouring Warrington or Cheshire, which have been put into tier 2, and they are also lower than they are in Bristol, which has been moved from tier 3 to tier 2 today. What exactly do we have to do to be moved out of tier 3?

Matt Hancock: I understand my hon. Friend's disappointment at this decision. We looked very closely at Trafford, Stockport, Tameside and nearby High Peak, and the proposal to take a different decision for them from the one that had been taken for their near neighbours. The challenge is that each time we have done that in the past, we have then seen cases rebound, and there continues to be significant pressure on the NHS in the north-west, including Manchester. I know that my hon. Friend and I have proposed different approaches on this one, and I look forward to working with him and people right across Manchester to get this sorted.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): We need to make sure that schools continue to be a safe environment for students and staff, and I would like to take the opportunity to thank all school staff and headteachers across Luton, who have done so much to make their schools as covid-secure as possible. I note the point made by the Secretary of State about the announcement later regarding testing in schools, but will the Government be publishing the evidence to support the use of lateral flow tests for serial testing of students, as this is outside the licensed use and requires a change to the legal duty to isolate?

Matt Hancock: We are working on exactly that proposal, because the need to use testing and use the easily available and rapid-return lateral flow devices is incredibly important. They have an important role to play, used in the right settings, in the same way that the PCR tests have an important role to play, but it takes longer to get the results back with those tests. I look forward to working with the hon. Lady, with Luton Council, and with all those across Bedfordshire to try to get this sorted. Clearly, case rates in Bedfordshire are shooting up in a very worrying way, and I thank her for her efforts and public health messaging to say to everybody in Bedfordshire, including those in Luton, "Let's work together to get this sorted."

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I asked my right hon. Friend to consider restrictions on a more local level than county-wide, and I am grateful that he has done so across the country today. Infections in Tunbridge Wells, while much lower than the average in the county of Kent as a whole, are nevertheless rising, and there is pressure on the local NHS, so I understand why there is no change from tier 3 today. However, will the Secretary of State commit to apply the five tests fortnightly, and to reduce our level of restrictions as soon as they are met? Will he also have a word with the Chancellor to see what extra support can be given to businesses in the hospitality sector, which have just lost the most important part of the trading year in what has been a miserable year for them?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course I will talk to the Chancellor about the point that my right hon. Friend raises. Of course, we do already have a significant amount of support for hospitality businesses, but I understand how difficult this is.

[*Matt Hancock*]

On the point about looking at local areas, we will absolutely do so, as we have demonstrated in the decisions taken today. For instance, just over the border in East Sussex, we have unfortunately had to put Hastings and Rother into tier 3. Tunbridge Wells today has a case rate of 288 per 100,000, and I would say to everybody right across Kent that we really need to act with serious responsibility. No matter which part of Kent a person is in, we have a very serious problem in Kent, and the only way in which we can get it under control is for people in Kent to essentially behave as if they have the virus and are trying not to pass it on to somebody else. Be really cautious in Kent: it is the area of the country that has the biggest problem in terms of case rates, and therefore there are huge pressures on the NHS there. I thank everyone who works in the NHS in Kent for what they are doing.

We are putting in as much support as we can, and I look forward to working with my right hon. Friend, all colleagues from across Kent and of course the county council and district councils to try to get this under control. Other parts of the country have done it and brought the case rate down, and we have been able to take some into tier 2. I am sure that we can get there in Kent, but we have to work hard to make that happen.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): On Monday, I asked the Secretary of State when care home residents in County Durham would get the vaccine and he did not answer the question. I have now been contacted by GPs in Chester-le-Street in my constituency who were first promised the vaccine on 16 December. That was put back to 21 December. Having done all the work to set up the hub, they have now been told that the vaccine will not be available till the new year. So when will residents in Chester-le-Street get the vaccine? I do not want hype or generalisations; I just want a straightforward answer for those constituents.

Matt Hancock: We are opening more and more GP vaccination hubs each day. The answer specifically on Chester-le-Street is as soon as we practically can, but it has to be done in a safe way. That is out of my hands and out of the right hon. Gentleman's hands. An important operational set of procedures needs to be gone through to open the hubs. It is complicated. I will look into the right hon. Gentleman's example and write to him with details, but he will understand, as I am sure the people of Chester-le-Street will, that we are trying to get the vaccine rolled out as quickly and as safely as possible, but "safely" is an important part of that.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that if people in Harborough and Oadby and Wigston continue to drive down rates of infection locally, the different districts and boroughs in Leicestershire can be put in different tiers if the data supports that? Will he also join me in congratulating our local NHS here in Leicestershire on the efficient way in which it is rolling out the vaccine across the county?

Matt Hancock: Yes, on both counts. We looked at Leicestershire in great detail, and I wish that we could have taken the county and the city out of tier 3, but unfortunately, the data did not support that conclusion.

I am grateful to everybody across Leicestershire, because I know that this has been a long, hard slog with measures in place for a long time.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Let me start by thanking the people of my constituency and across Gateshead who have worked really hard to get the figure down. Professor Michael Marmot's covid-19 review, which was published this week, shows that the pandemic has exposed long-standing health inequalities, particularly in the north. Public health teams play a vital part in this pandemic and are core to addressing those longer-term health inequalities. What has the Secretary of State done to ensure that public health teams are properly funded so that they can address those inequities and, as Professor Marmot says, "build back fairer"?

Matt Hancock: We are absolutely determined to build back better. That needs to involve tackling long-term underlying health inequalities. A huge programme of work will be needed to do that, after the pandemic has demonstrated those inequalities.

People in Gateshead have done a great job of getting the case rate down. Like other areas, it is still in tier 3—we are not quite there yet. I know that my team and the hon. Lady's local director of public health have been talking about getting Gateshead and the rest of the north-east into tier 2 when we can. I hope that we can do that, but for now, let us be cautious and keep this under control.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con) [V]: There will naturally be disappointment across Yorkshire as many areas stay in tier 3. I appreciate that York's tier will be affected by the current virus picture, but on which of the five criteria will the city of York have to improve on to stand a good chance of moving down a tier in future reviews? Will that depend significantly on how our neighbouring local authorities perform against the five criteria?

Matt Hancock: We do look at those human geographies because many people commute from North Yorkshire into York, but York and many of the local authorities around it have done an absolutely fantastic job of bringing the virus under control. In York, the case rate is 65 per 100,000—a bit higher than we typically take places into tier 1. For instance, Herefordshire is at 45, which is the same level as Cornwall when it was put into tier 1, but York is moving in the right direction. The over-60s case rate is also low. There has been some pressure, as my hon. Friend knows, on the hospital, but that is abating. Therefore, York and large swathes of North Yorkshire are moving in the right direction. I urge everybody right across North Yorkshire to stick at it.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State will remember that he has agreed to meet me and my constituent Kellie Shiers to discuss the issues that she has had accessing cancer services during the pandemic. During the pandemic, Kelly worked on the frontline with her ambulance service in Greater Manchester, despite her history of breast cancer, but she could not have her check-up and mammogram when it was due. When she did have it, the cancer had returned and spread to her bones. She is now having chemotherapy and may need surgery. I understand that

the Secretary of State has many demands on his time, but can he ensure that this meeting is able to go ahead in early January, as these matters are time-sensitive?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I can. I am very sorry that that meeting has not happened yet, and we will get right on to it for early January.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The changes for Bedfordshire announced by my right hon. Friend will be disappointing to residents and businesses, but it will be helpful for them to understand that, in setting up the tier system, my right hon. Friend established clear criteria, and he is publishing the data and has said that he will be open to regular reviews. On those criteria, when it comes to the issue of hospitals and pressure on the NHS, that is not a data-driven criterion; it comes with statements that the NHS is under considerable pressure, which is very difficult for people to understand, because we always hear—during pre-covid times and now—that the hospitals are under pressure. Will my right hon. Friend commit himself to producing projections of occupancy rates and acute bed occupancy rates across the NHS and, if possible, on a local hospital system basis?

Matt Hancock: Yes, we are working exactly on how to demonstrate that in a numerical rather than a narrative form, not least for the reasons that my hon. Friend sets out. We have seen a very sharp rise in cases across Bedfordshire, especially in the more rural areas, including North East Bedfordshire, so it is so important that people across Bedfordshire take that personal responsibility and follow the new tier 3 rules. I hope that we can get the rate to come down as fast as it has gone up.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab) [V]: People across Chesterfield will be very disappointed that, with all the work that they have done and with Chesterfield having lower transmission rates than some of the areas in tier 2, they remain in tier 3. They will be especially disappointed by the Health Secretary's suggestion that the communities that have worked hardest and been the most disciplined are the ones that are in tier 2. We know that that is not the case. Does he not realise that, if the Government could offer a package that supported our hospitality sector, and if they were not, at the very last minute, announcing changes to our schools just two days before they break up, there would be more credibility to the sense that it is personal responsibility that is the problem here, rather than the ineptitude of this Government?

Matt Hancock: No.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On behalf of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), may I thank the Secretary of State for meeting us and for promising that he will adopt a more granular approach? We can assure him that we will work hard in Lincolnshire to try to get our tier, and that of the neighbouring cities, down. May I also thank him and the Prime Minister for resisting pressure from the Opposition and from Wales and Scotland to change the rules on Christmas? That is entirely the right approach. I also thank him for the tone that he has adopted today in saying that, if we are to defeat this, it is a matter of self-responsibility and personal ownership of our health.

Matt Hancock: That is right. We looked very closely at the southern end of Lincolnshire, which is a long way from where the rates are incredibly elevated around Lincoln, the coast and West Lindsey, but unfortunately it was not possible to bring any of the lower-tier local authority areas in Lincolnshire out of tier 3, and over the border in Peterborough we have seen a very sharp rise. So we are not there yet, but I hope that we can make significant progress, especially if everyone listens to my right hon. Friend and takes personal responsibility for their actions and tries to do everything they can not to pass the disease on.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab) [V]: Jane Roche is a great champion of her community of Castle Vale. Her dad, Vincent, died of covid. Her sister Jocelyn died five days later of covid. They are two of the nearly 10,000 in the west midlands who have died of covid. Jane and her family are devastated. They grieve for the loss of their loved ones who will not be with them this Christmas. She asks the Secretary of State this: why have we had the largest number of deaths in Europe? Can we be confident that lessons are being learnt and that the mistakes made will not be repeated? She also asks: when will the inquiry into what happened over covid be established and, crucially, will the Secretary of State meet her and other relatives of those who have sadly died from across Birmingham?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and constituents to hear their stories. Many of us have lost those close to us in this terrible pandemic. We are constantly learning how to do things better, and we are constantly learning more about the disease. For instance, we had the news earlier this week about a new variant because our surveillance system enables us to look out for changes and try to understand them. There are huge challenges, as he knows, but I always try to approach this by looking at how we can get the country through what is an incredibly difficult and unprecedented time with as few people as possible suffering in the way that his constituent, Jane, has.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): The news that Buckinghamshire is going into tier 3 heralds the bleakest of midwinters, especially for local hospitality businesses, and it is imperative that they get extra help and that this lasts for as short a time as humanly possible. Given that Stoke Mandeville Hospital is currently under intense pressure, with many staff off, either with covid or self-isolating, it is alarming that Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust has been given no date for when it will get a supply of vaccines, especially when neighbouring Oxfordshire is in a lower tier and already has them. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that residents and healthcare staff can get the vaccine locally in Buckinghamshire before Christmas?

Matt Hancock: I will write to my hon. Friend immediately with our plans for the roll-out of primary care-based vaccination facilities in Aylesbury. I regret having to put Buckinghamshire into tier 3 measures, but unfortunately it was absolutely necessary given the numbers. Aylesbury Vale, the local authority area, has a case rate of 235 per 100,000 and it is rising really sharply, and my hon. Friend has set out the challenges at Stoke Mandeville, which is an excellent hospital but under significant pressure. I am glad that he understands why we have

[*Matt Hancock*]

had to take this decision, and I hope that across Buckinghamshire we can get these cases down and get people vaccinated as soon as possible.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Secondary schools in south Manchester are worried about the extra pressure of running a mass testing regime on top of the contact tracing they are doing, on top of the online learning they are enabling and on top of their normal, everyday school responsibilities. We really need to know what support they are going to get to do the testing, so why does the Secretary of State for Education not come to the House to set out the plans and answer questions, as the Secretary of State for Health rightly does?

Matt Hancock: The Secretary of State for Education will be setting out these plans. We need to get them out as soon as possible so that people have the last couple of days of term to work on them, and he will be doing that. Testing in schools is incredibly important, and it is going to become more important as we roll it out more broadly. I am really glad to hear some of the statements from the teaching unions about how enthusiastic they are about testing, especially in secondary schools. I am sure that the Education Secretary will want to work with the hon. Gentleman and others right across the country to roll out this programme as effectively as possible and to make sure that we have high-quality testing in schools, so that we can keep kids in education as much as possible and get the infection rate down by finding the positive cases and ensuring that they isolate.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It being Christmas, and given the circumstances that we are in, covid-compliant carol singers in Stockport have been heard singing the words of that well-known epidemiologist Mariah Carey, “All I want for Christmas is tier 2”, but sadly their entreaty for that outcome has not been successful at all. Can my right hon. Friend explain, further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), precisely what more residents of Stockport need to do in order to regain some relative freedom?

Matt Hancock: Yes. We have to keep getting the case rate down. In Stockport it is still over 100. There is further to go. Right across Greater Manchester and the surrounding areas, I would urge people to do as they have been doing, because the case rates have come down really quite significantly. Right across Greater Manchester and in Stockport, people have been doing the right thing, but the pressures on the NHS remain, partly from people who are in hospital with covid from when the rates were really high. I hope that we can make the move as soon as possible, and in the meantime I hope that everybody has a happy, safe and careful Christmas in Stockport.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) [V]: UK and EU pharmaceutical companies have warned that no deal will lead to delays of up to six weeks in obtaining vital medicines. Given that the Pfizer vaccine is complex to move and distributed from Brussels at -70°, does the Health Secretary agree that no deal would be catastrophic and that everything minus possible should be done to get a deal to protect our access to vital medicines?

Matt Hancock: We have plans in place to ensure that the vaccine can continue to be distributed whatever the outcome of the discussions on a future trading arrangement with the EU.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: Early this morning I visited a vaccination centre in Harlow that is running like a military operation and has started vaccinating the elderly and those in care homes. Will my right hon. Friend thank West Essex clinical commissioning group, GPs, staff and volunteers who are vaccinating many hundreds of Harlow residents? Will he also set out a route map by which Harlow can return to tier 2? I strongly welcome the testing announced for schools, but can he confirm that school openings will not be delayed in January?

Matt Hancock: I am very grateful for what my right hon. Friend says about the vaccination centre in Harlow. It is an uplifting experience visiting a vaccination centre. Rarely have I seen so many smiles on faces this year, which has been such a difficult year, as when I visited the Milton Keynes vaccination centre last week. I am really glad that it is working well in Harlow. I add my thanks to his thanks to the GPs, the volunteers and the staff—all those organising the vaccinations.

In terms of a route map out of the tier, of course in time the vaccination programme will help, but for now the best thing people can do is to bring the case rate down by doing everything they personally can not to pass on this disease. Unfortunately the case rate in Harlow is 302 per 100,000—very, very elevated—and in nearby Epping Forest, unfortunately, it is over 500. It is a very serious problem. We all have to pull together to try to sort out this growth of the virus locally, and that is the route to tier 2.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): May I echo to the Secretary of State what my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) said on behalf of the people of our community?

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab) [V]: Scientific advisers, healthcare workers and doctors have all warned that the Christmas season will result in higher infection rates. The public are not fools, and know that tougher restrictions are likely to be needed in the new year. Will the Secretary of State come out with the obvious and admit now that he will need to bring in harsher restrictions in January, ending the uncertainty faced by families and businesses, or will he just allow these dangerous mixed messages to continue from Government?

Matt Hancock: Where I agree with the hon. Lady is that the public are not fools; the public know that it is their responsibility, as well as the Government's, to get this under control. That is where the emphasis on people taking personal responsibility to ensure that they do not pass on the virus this Christmas comes from. If we look at how the public across Luton and the whole country have behaved during this pandemic, under restrictions that are so inimical to our way of life and so unprecedented, we see that people have still followed them because they know that they are important. That is the approach we are trying to take for Christmas, to make sure that we can keep this precious time of year, but in a way that is safe.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I accepted Kirklees being in tier 3 when we had some of the highest covid rates in the country, but cases have now plummeted and hospitalisations are down. The case rate in Kirklees is about 167—below the English average—and in my Colne Valley constituency the case rates are actually under 100 per 100,000, and therefore I really thought we had a strong case to be brought down into tier 2. I appreciate that the Secretary of State wants to be cautious, but can he tell me when the next review will be, and what more my constituents need to do to come out of tier 3?

Matt Hancock: Legally, there is a review every two weeks, but in practice we review every week, and I will not wait a week longer than necessary to get places out of tier 3 if we can safely do that. To people across Colne Valley I would say, first, that the reduction in rates has been impressive, but we are not there yet. The pressure on the NHS has reduced, but is still significant. I would also say to everybody in Colne Valley that they have a Member of Parliament who probably makes his case to me more than any other. It is not for want of effort from the local MP, but this decision is based on the epidemiology, and I really hope we can get there soon.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab) [V]: Madam Deputy Speaker, can I take this opportunity to wish you and the House staff a merry Christmas and a very happy new year?

I have had numerous emails from unpaid carers in Enfield North who are concerned about access to the vaccine. Can the Secretary of State set out exactly when unpaid carers will receive the covid-19 vaccine, given that they spend their time caring for extremely vulnerable people and could pass on the virus? Any guidance would be a huge comfort to residents and their unpaid carers in Enfield North.

Matt Hancock: The guidance has been set out by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. I think it is very important that we follow the clinical advice in this prioritisation to make sure that it is fair.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I would like to thank the Department of Health and Social Care and the Secretary of State for everything they are doing, but I am sure he will appreciate, like me, just how fed up my local hospitality sector is across County Durham and the north-east. Will he join me in thanking local people for everything they are doing, because case rates have really come down? Will he also thank my local NHS staff? I saw them, when I visited on a night shift a couple of weeks ago, not only giving care to people with covid, but really showing love to them as they looked after them. Will he commit to a fortnightly review, and will he ignore the LA7 group of local authorities and allow County Durham and perhaps other parts of the north-east to go a separate way if case rates come down in the future? Can he update me and write to me about the vaccine roll-out, and will he also push the Chancellor for extra support for my local hospitality sector?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course; I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as I can on the roll-out of the vaccine across his part of County Durham. Making sure that everybody can get access is so important, which is why we are taking this community-led approach as well as

using the big hospital sites. The truth is that we do look at County Durham on its own merits, as well as, of course, as part of the north-east local authorities. People in County Durham have been acting in a way that gets the case rates down, and I am very grateful to them for that. We are not quite there yet and there is still that pressure on the NHS, but we are moving in the right direction.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: In the past 100 days, more than 23,000 people in our country have lost their lives due to covid. That scale of loss was completely unnecessary; it is the result of a second wave caused by this Government's failure to put public health first. We know the Government ignored the scientists' advice in September before that second wave hit, and we know scientists are warning that the current plans, including plans for Christmas, are going to cause a deadly third wave. Will the Secretary of State come clean today and tell us how many lives Government scientists are warning him will be lost over the next few weeks under the current plans?

Matt Hancock: The advice I have and the answer to the hon. Gentleman is, I hope, as few as possible—especially as we get the vaccine rolling out. I want to pick up something he said about this pandemic. This pandemic is caused by the virus, not by any Government around the world. It is caused by the virus, and that is why it is so important that we all come together to try to tackle it, rather than taking this overly politicised approach.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): His waitress tested positive, so the proprietor of the small café closed immediately and went into self-isolation, but test, track and trace has not contacted him, so he is without the wherewithal to claim the allowance. Can the Secretary of State fix it?

Matt Hancock: Yes; if my right hon. Friend has the test reference number I will get on to it right away. If NHS Test and Trace has not contacted the owner, that might imply that he does not have to self-isolate, but of course I will want to look into the details of the case before making such a recommendation. I will ensure that my right hon. Friend's constituents get a full, clinically approved recommendation ASAP.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Mr James Canning became our first octogenarian in Brent to receive the vaccine earlier this week. While congratulating him and the Wembley Practice team who delivered it, does the Secretary of State share my concern that care homes in Brent have been advised that the 970 doses that are in the vaccine packs cannot be split because of the licensing conditions, which means that those in our care homes who are over 80 may have to wait until February or for the Oxford vaccine before they can be vaccinated? Is that the case? If so, why? That is hardly the "protective ring" around care homes that he promised.

Matt Hancock: I am glad to say that we are making significant progress on tackling this issue. When the hon. Gentleman says it is a licensing concern, that should not be read to imply that it is some bureaucratic rule; it is about ensuring that things are done safely. If the vaccine is not delivered safely to the site, it is not an effective vaccine. Therefore, we are taking it carefully to

[*Matt Hancock*]

be able to vaccinate in care homes. There has been some vaccination in care homes across the UK, so it can be done, and I hope we can make good progress soon.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for the reassurance he gave me last week about the vaccine roll-out to rural communities. Will he join me in paying tribute to everyone in Cumbria and the wider UK who is involved in the delivery of the covid vaccination programme, and does he agree that the best way we can build a positive 2021 is for people to actively take up their invitation to have this vital vaccine when it comes, and to get their life-saving jab as soon as it is offered?

Matt Hancock: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. He knows about these things, and he is exactly right that the best thing everyone can do, when the NHS calls, is to take up that vaccine and get it done. It will protect them and their community and help to protect the whole country and get us all out of these restrictions at which we choke.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Yesterday, on College Green, I met members of the Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice group and spoke with those who have lost loved ones during the pandemic and will be spending a first Christmas without them. They delivered a 200,000-strong petition to Downing Street asking for an immediate public inquiry in order to identify and learn lessons. There has been an ongoing inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus, to which the group has given evidence. May I ask whether the Secretary of State has read the APPG's interim report and engaged with its findings?

Matt Hancock: I look at all these sorts of reports, as does the team at the Department, constantly to try to learn. Given that this is an unprecedented situation, all health authorities across the UK, whether here or in Edinburgh, Cardiff or Belfast, are constantly talking and trying to make sure that all the insights that can be gained can be applied. One example is that we now have contact tracing in the UK reaching over 90% of contacts. That is due to hard work and improvement, learning the insights from each other about how we can make systems better.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I am sure I speak on behalf of the whole House in thanking my right hon. Friend and his team for all their hard work over the course of this year to combat this dreadful virus, and also for updating the House on a regular basis on what action is being taken. May I give him the opportunity to reiterate the key message as we approach Christmas: that anyone who shows any signs of having the virus must get a test and, if it is positive, must self-isolate and not mix and mingle with people, so we can cut down on the spread of this dreadful virus? People must think twice before they mix with elderly relatives if they have been in contact with anyone who has had this dreadful virus.

Matt Hancock: I agree with every word my hon. Friend has just said. Over this Christmas period, I hope that people will, yes, take a moment to have some relaxation, especially given what a tough year it has

been, and have the chance to see loved ones, but will do so carefully, knowing that one in three people who have this disease do not know that they have it because they have no symptoms. Anybody can be inadvertently passing it on to a vulnerable loved one, so they need to be very, very careful.

To reiterate, it is in the best interests of everybody, their loved ones and their community to get a test at the first sign of symptoms—testing is now very, very widely available right across the country—and if the test is positive or if they are contacted by NHS Test and Trace because they are a contact, to isolate and do so not just because they have to but because it is the right thing to do to isolate fully and properly.

Finally, I strongly agree with my hon. Friend in wanting to thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the whole of your team and all the staff of the House for supporting me on the many occasions I have had to come to the House this year and, in what has been an incredibly difficult year for the House as well as the nation, for all the work you have all done to support us in keeping our democracy going all the way through this, no matter how bad it got.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Secretary of State for his kind words. The whole House, and certainly the whole of Mr Speaker's team, thanks the Secretary of State, his Ministers and the shadow Ministers, who have worked so hard to keep us informed all the way through this dreadful pandemic.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: It is all right. I have not forgotten that we have a late entry. The final question—I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: May I take this opportunity to wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and your family a very merry Christmas and a happy new year? Thank you for all you do in this House. I congratulate the Secretary of State and all his team on their energy and dedication in what has been an extremely difficult year. It has given us encouragement whenever he has come to the House.

Students, families and workers from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will be travelling by boat, train, car and plane to meet their families from all tiers and very strict conditions. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the devolved Administrations, in particular Northern Ireland, to ensure that travel can continue to happen within the regulations that we must all adhere to?

Matt Hancock: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for his kind words. He said that people have been encouraged every time I have come to the Dispatch Box. Given some of the things I have had to announce, I am sure that is not quite true, but it has been my duty to come and answer questions as much as possible. I have probably answered more questions from the hon. Gentleman than from anyone, and I am very happy to answer this last one for this year.

I spoke to Robin Swann, the Health Minister for Northern Ireland, this morning as part of a call involving all four of us across the devolved Administrations. We are determined to ensure that people can travel across the whole of the UK as much as is safely possible, but,

again, we urge caution and personal responsibility. People can take advantage of this change in the regulations over Christmas to see loved ones—sometimes loved ones they have not been able to see all year—but we urge them to do that with the appropriate concern for the risk of spreading the disease, and to make sure, therefore, that everybody has a merry Christmas and a happy new year. We will return here, no doubt, in 2021 with the hope of that vaccine coming fast into view so that we can get to the point where I do not have to return every week to discuss restrictions and, instead, we can all get our freedom back.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Secretary of State for his patience in going through the whole statement, and everyone who is here for continuing to do their duty on behalf of their constituents. We hope that the Secretary of State has a little bit of rest over Christmas, but we are all pretty sure that he will continue working to try to keep our people safe. Thank you.

In order to allow everyone in the Chamber the safety to leave without the hordes coming in for the next statement, I will suspend the House for a few minutes.

1.1 pm

Sitting suspended.

Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement

1.5 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): Today I have written to all local authorities in England thanking their councillors, officers and employees for their exceptional service this year. From carers to teachers to social workers to refuse collectors to council officers, as well as the elected members, they have worked tirelessly over the course of this pandemic to keep us safe, to provide support to the most vulnerable, to assist local businesses and to deliver public services under immense pressure. I think I speak for the whole House in saying a sincere thank you and in wishing them and their families a happy and peaceful Christmas.

From the start of the pandemic, we committed to ensuring that councils had the resources they needed to step up and support their communities. We have provided councils with more than £7.2 billion of additional funding for covid-19 expenditure. We have ensured that they receive support to manage associated losses in income, including from sales, fees, charges, leisure centres and local taxes, and that is expected to amount to further billions of pounds of support. That commitment remains undimmed, and the settlement we are announcing today ensures that councils have the resources they need to continue that work next year, to play their part in the recovery of their communities and to deliver first-class public services.

As we look ahead to 2021 and 2022, the annual settlement makes an extra £2.2 billion available to fund the provision of critical public services including adult and children's social care. Within that, we are giving authorities access to an additional £1 billion for adult's and children's social care, made up of £300 million of social care grant and the flexibility of a 3% adult social care precept. On average, English councils will see a 4.5% cash-terms increase in core spending power, which is also an increase in real terms. That is testimony to the support that our local government deserves, and it comes off the back of three settlements in a row that have increased funding in real terms.

The £1 billion grant announced at last year's spending review will continue, along with all other existing social care funding. Balancing the contributions of national and local taxpayers, we are giving councils increased flexibility through a 2% council tax referendum limit, with an extra 3% for social care authorities. Councils will, of course, want to take into account the financial circumstances of their residents and to protect households from excessive increases in bills. It is incumbent on them to balance these competing pressures and reach the right decision for their local areas.

To help councils continue reducing council tax for those least able to pay, including households hit hard financially by the pandemic, I am making £670 million of new grant funding available outside the core settlement for local council tax support. Lower tier councils, including districts, will benefit from a new one-off £111 million lower tier services grant, and we are providing certainty and stability by confirming that the main funding allocations for the full range of council services will rise in line with inflation.

[Robert Jenrick]

Our settlement also addresses the extra costs incurred by councils in rural areas, providing an extra £4 million to the rural services delivery grant—the highest contribution to date, at £85 million. We are also proposing a further £622 million of new homes bonus allocations. We will invite views on how we can reform the scheme next year to ensure that it is focused where homes are needed the most and where councils are ambitious to get on and deliver them.

Despite the arrival of vaccines, we will continue to live with covid-19 for some months. That is why, alongside the core settlement, I am announcing comprehensive measures, including £1.55 billion of additional, un-ringfenced grant funding for covid expenditure. Our measures insure against funding shortfalls, and I am particularly pleased to confirm today the scope of and approach to our very well received scheme to reimburse councils for 75% of irrecoverable lost tax income from 2020-21.

As the cold weather sets in, the protection of those sleeping rough amid the pandemic continues to be one of my priorities. Our world-leading Everyone In initiative was and remains a powerful testament to what local and central Government can achieve together. We are building on that work to ensure that as few as possible of the 29,000 people who were helped off the streets under that scheme, and subsequently, return to life on the streets: we are spending over £750 million next year to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping—a 60% increase on the previous year's spending review. In addition, we are providing £165 million of new funding to councils for the troubled families programme, underlining our continued commitment to the most vulnerable in society. Following the passage of the Domestic Abuse Bill, we will provide £125 million next year to enable councils to meet their duties in full to provide the support that victims of domestic abuse and their children undoubtedly deserve.

Serious challenges remain, but the start of the vaccine roll-out last week offers us cause for optimism and allows us to at least begin to glimpse the world beyond the pandemic. We want to work with local councils to build a new country beyond covid—a country that is more prosperous, greener, safer and more neighbourly. Local government will be integral to the achievement of that shared vision. We will establish a new £4 billion levelling-up fund, building on the success of our £3.6 billion towns and high streets funds. Any local area will be eligible to apply directly to this fund, which will finance the everyday infrastructure, town centre regeneration and culture that communities need and local people want. The UK shared prosperity fund will help to level up and create opportunity across the UK. A UK-wide investment framework for that will be published by my Department early next year.

The Government are funding vital local infrastructure, with total capital spending at £100 billion. That will fund once-in-a-generation changes to local communities and deliver the highest sustained levels of public sector net investment since the 1970s, including the biggest hospital building programme in living memory, and £2.2 billion investment in our schools funding programme to rebuild 500 schools over the next decade. In addition, local councils will benefit from £1.7 billion for local

roads maintenance and upgrades to tackle potholes, which will improve local connectivity and deliver better roads for our communities.

I want local government to emerge stronger, more sustainable and better able to meet the needs of those it serves. That means greater openness and accountability, and in a minority of cases it means better financial management and regard for taxpayers' money. To that end, my Department is publishing today its response to Sir Tony Redmond's excellent review of the effectiveness of external audit and transparency. We will provide councils with an additional £15 million next year to implement Sir Tony's recommendations. We are preserving the ability of local authorities to invest in programmes to power growth by lowering Public Works Loan Board interest rates, but we must also protect taxpayers from unwise risky investments of the kind we have seen, sadly, in some councils in recent years. Those practices must now end.

When there is a clearer path ahead, we will work with the sector and Members across the House to seek a new consensus for broader reforms to local government, including the fair funding review and the business rates reset, and we will ensure that councils are set on a long-term trajectory of sustainable growth and fair resources.

This will, I hope, be viewed as a significant settlement that paves the way for a bright future for our local communities as they seek to bounce back from an exceptionally difficult year. The settlement will deliver £2.2 billion of extra funding, a 4.5% cash and real terms increase in core spending power, and it will further fund councils to ensure that they steer the course of the remaining months of the covid-19 pandemic with certainty and confidence. Building on last year's settlement, which exceptionally received cross-party support, it puts councils, which were at the forefront of our response to the pandemic, at the forefront of our recovery, and I commend this statement to the House.

1.16 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, and I echo his words of thanks to council staff for the sterling work they have carried out in the most daunting of circumstances. However, the Secretary of State's announcement today leaves local authorities facing a vast funding gap that will inevitably lead to job losses, cuts in key frontline services such as adult social care, and the closure of yet more treasured community assets such as libraries, youth centres and leisure centres.

Perhaps one of the most shocking aspects of the settlement is the Government's plan to force councils to hike up council tax while the country still faces an unprecedented health crisis and the deepest recession for 300 years. The Government are proposing a council tax hike more than twice the rate of inflation. The Conservatives have decided to clobber hard-working families when their jobs and incomes are already under extreme pressure, and in return, those taxpayers will get fewer services.

Council tax is a regressive tax that hits families on average incomes harder than the wealthy. It also raises less money in poorer areas. A 5% increase in Surrey raises £38 million, while a 5% increase in Blackburn with Darwen raises just £2.8 million. An older person

living in a less wealthy area, such as one of the red wall seats, will see their Conservative MP tax them more but cut the care services they rely on.

In his first speech as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson stood on the steps of Downing Street and said he would “fix the crisis in social care once and for all with a clear plan we have prepared”.

No one has seen a dot or comma of that plan in the 18 months since. Costs for social care are soaring, yet today’s settlement will make the crisis worse and will hit older people living in less affluent areas hardest.

In 2011, the average band D council tax was £1,439. With the Conservative council tax bombshell announced today, the average bill for next year will be £1,909. That is a rise of 33% under this Conservative Government. The message to the public is clear: “Pay more but get less under the Conservatives, with Rishi Sunak’s council tax hike coming your way in the middle of the worst recession for three centuries.”

Can the Secretary of State please tell us how he expects families to afford a 5% council tax hike in the middle of an unprecedented economic crisis? When can we expect to see the Government’s plan to fix the social care crisis instead of leaving older people struggling without the support they need? Given the urgency of the pandemic, by how much are the Government increasing the public health grant next year, and what does the Secretary of State expect councils to do about the 25% lost council tax and business rate income that he is not compensating them for?

Robert Jenrick: I echo the hon. Gentleman’s thanks to local council workers across the country. He talks about our pledge to support local councils and to ensure that they are fully funded for the work that they have done during covid, and we have made good that promise. We have provided £7.2 billion already. Local councils to date have reported that they have spent £4 billion and are projecting that they will spend almost £6.2 billion to the end of the year, so we will have provided local councils with as much, if not more, funding than they have reported.

The hon. Gentleman refers to funding for local council tax losses and for sales fees and charges. Our schemes are extremely generous in both regards, providing 75p in the pound of losses for local councils to ensure that they can weather the particular storm that they have been through this year. He refers to council tax costs. Local councils are not under any obligation to increase council taxes. We only have to look back at the record of the last Labour Government to see what happens under Labour. Under Labour, council tax doubled. Under this Conservative Government, council tax is lower in real terms today than it was in 2010-11.

It is difficult to see how the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues can pose as the guardians of taxpayer value. I appreciate that he is on what we might call a sticky wicket in this regard. We only have to look at his local Labour council in Croydon. It purchased a hotel above the asking price, which has now gone bankrupt. It created a housing company with a £200 million loan and it could not say whether it had built any houses. The cabinet has been described as acting like some kind of wrecking ball, except that the wrecking ball was directed at its own council. Or, indeed, we could look at Nottingham’s Labour council, which was described recently

by its auditors as having “institutional blindness” to its financial mismanagement and ineptitude, which included creating an energy company called Robin Hood. That is a rather unusual definition of Robin Hood’s activities—instead of taking from the rich, it robbed everyone.

The truth is that under Labour councils, it is the public who lose out. The public will pay the price in Croydon in lost jobs, poorer services and, ultimately, higher council taxes. We will continue to support local councils, the overwhelming majority of which, of all political persuasions, have done a sterling job this year, and we will ensure that they get the resources they need to continue that work into the new year.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: In these exceptional times, we have another single-year statement—or single-year funding—and I am sure my right hon. Friend will wish to return to multi-year funding as soon as practically possible. I welcome the £8 billion that has been given in additional funding this year alone to councils to support them in the pandemic, and the commitment to more than £3 billion for next year. Obviously a number of areas, particularly in London and the south-east, have gone into tier 3, which does mean additional costs and forgoing income that local authorities will need to try to balance their books not only in this current financial year but going into the next year. Will my right hon. Friend say what additional support will be available to local leaders in the areas that are facing the highest restrictions under covid-19?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I share his desire to have a multi-year settlement for local government. Obviously, this year has proved a unique one, in which the kaleidoscope has been shaken in many respects and will take time to settle. I hope that when we come to do the settlement next year it will indeed be a multi-year one. I believe that that is the expectation of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, but he will no doubt give confirmation in due course, as we see how 2021 turns out.

On local councils in tier 3, we are providing further funding for both councils themselves and their local business community, on a month-by-month basis, if they are in tier 2 or tier 3. The purpose of today’s settlement, in looking ahead to the likely covid expenditure that councils will face next year, is to ensure that in respect of both the month-by-month costs that councils are incurring, which have been about £500 million a month, and the losses they are incurring in sales, fees and charges, they at least have forward guidance to the middle point of the next calendar year. Of course we all hope that by Easter, and certainly by the summer, the position in the country and within councils will be dramatically different.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): On behalf of the Select Committee, may I join both Front Benchers in thanking councils up and down the country for the brilliant job they have done in keeping services going and communities safe in the past few terrible months?

The Government are forecasting a 4.5% increase in spending power for local authorities, and the assumption there is that councils will put up council tax by 5%, including the 3% for social care, all in one year. Although councils have the discretion to decide on that, will he confirm

[Mr Clive Betts]

that the spending power in his statement assumes that all councils will put their council tax up by 5%? There is a forecast in the statement about ongoing covid costs. Does he accept that those costs might be greater? If they are, on an unforeseen basis, will the Government stand ready to provide extra money for councils if they can show that their costs are in excess of what the Government are so far calculating?

Robert Jenrick: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for all his work and that of his Committee over the year. He is right to say that the figures we quote of an up to 4.5% real-terms cash increase in core spending power are dependent on the choices that local councils make in the weeks and months ahead, but one would expect that; local councils and the local democratic process will have to balance the competing interests of providing public services and ensuring that hard-working people are not facing excessive increases in local council tax, and those will be different judgments in different parts of the country.

I will of course keep the covid costs being incurred by local councils under review. We have made good on our promises time and again since the start of the pandemic. Early in the pandemic, the Local Government Association came before the hon. Gentleman's Committee and estimated that costs incurred by local councils would be around £10 billion. We are going to end this financial year having provided local councils with, I suspect, about £10 billion, and we are providing further billions of pounds into next year. So we can see the Government's commitment and determination to support local councils.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con) [V]: First, I wish to thank the Secretary of State for his decision on the housing algorithm, the statement today, and the very significant work that he, his Ministers, the Department and indeed Isle of Wight Council have done during the pandemic, which has been vital. In the fair funding review, the Government for the first time recognised the additional cost of providing public services on the Isle of Wight—in effect, they recognised the Island as an island, and I am grateful for that. For understandable reasons, due to the covid pandemic, the review was put on hold. Does he accept that this delay has prevented Isle of Wight Council, despite its undoubted best efforts, from supporting Islanders to the same extent that mainland councils can support their residents? Finally, will he meet me and my local council to discuss funding these additional costs, as part of a consultation process and prior to the local government finance settlement for 2021-22?

Robert Jenrick: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and the leader of his local council, as would, I am sure, the Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall). I do not agree that the Isle of Wight has lacked the resources to respond to the pandemic; from what I have seen it has done a sterling job. The Isle of Wight has had significant amounts of additional support, and total covid-19 funding for the council so far has been £20.3 million. We have also provided support for the local business community amounting to £48 million, which has been brilliantly dispensed by my hon. Friend's local council, supporting 4,500 small and medium-sized businesses on the Isle of Wight. I am

pleased that my hon. Friend supports yesterday's announcement on the local housing need question, and hope that he will get on with building more homes on the Isle of Wight in the years ahead.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the additional funding that the Secretary of State has announced for tackling homelessness ensure that councils can continue to put a roof over the heads of people with no recourse to public funds? The local authorities that gave evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee last week welcomed the Government's winter support package for hard-pressed families, but it runs only until March. Does the Secretary of State have longer-term plans for how councils can support vulnerable households, so that councils can make their plans for the future?

Robert Jenrick: The right hon. Gentleman has a long-standing interest in this issue. It is important that we set out long-term plans both to help the cohort of people who came in off the streets through Everybody In and to make further strides in our overall effort to reduce rough sleeping to the absolute minimum. In the summer we asked local councils, including the right hon. Gentleman's, to draw up a plan for how they would assist those people who were in temporary accommodation into move-on accommodation, and then ultimately into either social housing or the private rental sector. We supported that with almost £100 million of funding.

The settlement announced today provides further funding for the next financial year that is the same as or greater than the amount of money that was available in this financial year, and it will be £750 million in total. We have also secured £430 million for new move-on accommodation and asked every local council in the country to bid for that so that councils can invest in accommodation to help to support the people they have taken in off the streets.

On no recourse to public funds, we have taken a number of steps this year. We have extended the derogation, not just to London but to the whole country, so that local councils can support European economic area nationals. There is of course, a cohort of people who are not EEA nationals, and we have allowed councils the discretion to support them when there is a risk to life. Many councils have chosen to do that throughout the pandemic and I am sure will do so this winter.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for the generous support that my local council has received during the pandemic. In particular, I wish to mention the £1 million rough sleepers fund and the £600,000 winter grant fund that we have received to support struggling families at this very difficult time. My local council staff have been doing a fantastic job, and my right hon. Friend is right to thank them for going above and beyond to serve our community.

My constituents are being told that in future they should expect council tax increases of 5% and that they should also expect to see cuts to vital services. Will my right hon. Friend please reassure my constituents that the generous funding settlement announced today, together with all the other measures, will mean that there will be no need for the council to choose to take such draconian measures as increasing council tax by 5% or making cuts in vital services?

Robert Jenrick: I am happy to reassure my hon. Friend's constituents in Telford that there should be no reason why her local council, Telford and Wrekin, should endanger local people's services. We have provided Telford and Wrekin Council with £22.5 million of covid-19 funding this year, and we have provided £30 million for local businesses, supporting 2,500 businesses in my hon. Friend's constituency. Of course, Telford is in the running for the towns fund and I have been to see some of the fantastic proposals that my hon. Friend is championing in that respect. Earlier in the year we provided £1 million of accelerated funding, which I think has gone towards the brilliant bridge linking Telford railway station with the town centre and the new tech zone being created there, which will create good-quality, high-skilled jobs for the future. The Getting Building fund has provided £15 million to the marches so that Shropshire and Herefordshire can get building and create and sustain jobs.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) [V]: The reality of this statement is that the Secretary of State has thanked local authorities for all the good work they have done during the covid crisis, and they can look forward to cuts in services and the loss of jobs next year.

I have a specific question on housing. The Secretary of State did not really reply to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on those with no recourse to public funds. Can he guarantee that the funding available to local authorities now to house all rough sleepers will become a permanent feature of Government policy, and that instead of just saying that they should provide move-on accommodation, the Government will ensure that local authorities can build the social housing—the council housing—that is so necessary to deal with the housing crisis that affects every part of this country?

Lastly, in his role as Secretary of State for Housing, will he introduce legislation to give greater security to those living in private rented accommodation, who are at the moment going through such stress through the fear of losing their homes when the protections are lifted at the end of this coronavirus crisis? We need to give people security in affordable housing in the future in this country.

Robert Jenrick: I forgot to say in response to the shadow Minister that of course the first and most celebrated customer of Robin Hood Energy in Nottingham was the right hon. Gentleman, the former Leader of the Opposition. On his questions, I can absolutely answer that this Government are committed to ending rough sleeping, and he can see from the 60% increase in funding in this settlement versus the last spending review the degree of resources that we are willing to put into this issue. It is not solely about money; it is also a crisis of health. There are issues to do with ex-offenders, law enforcement and immigration. We are doing everything we can, and I am working with my Cabinet colleagues to progress this issue. We are investing that £433 million in new, good-quality move-on accommodation, including some in London, working with the GLA and local councils, including his own, as well as pan-London organisations such as Peabody to get that accommodation up and running by the end of this year.

The right hon Gentleman asks about housing more generally, and I want to see more houses built in London as much as he does. He could go to his own council in Islington and ask it to do more. Its current local housing

need is for 2,300 homes, and it is building on average 1,000, so less than half the number of homes needed. Charity starts at home, and I suggest he goes to Islington and gets the council building to support the local community.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. As chairman of the county all-party parliamentary group, I welcome his confirmation of additional funding to provide stability for council finances next year. The county APPG has long campaigned for a more equitable methodology for distributing council funding that will promote levelling up and benefit not only historically underfunded counties such as Suffolk, but metropolitan areas. I therefore welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to fair funding, but can he provide further details of when the Government will bring forward such proposals for consultation?

Robert Jenrick: We all—certainly those of us on the Government Benches—would agree that we need an updated and fairer method of distributing public funds within local government. This year would have been the wrong time to bring that forward, I think. This is a one-year settlement in a period of almost unique instability in the sector. There might be an opportunity to do it next year, and my Department will work with the Treasury to review that. In the meantime, we have substantially increased the rural services delivery grant, taking it to £85 million, the highest amount to date, to support the delivery of public service in places such as Suffolk, where it is undoubtedly challenging and expensive.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the generous settlement he has secured for 2021-22. My Orpington constituency is part of the London Borough of Bromley, which, like other local authorities, faces significant uncertainty about funding from 2022-23 onwards, dealing with rising demands and the new normal following the covid situation. This year, the NHS will receive a multi-year settlement. When can a commitment be made by the Government to provide three or four-year financial settlements, which will be crucial in providing value for money for residents and service users, for local government into the future?

Robert Jenrick: As I have said in response to other questions, it would clearly be beneficial for the sector for there to be a multi-year settlement, but this was not the opportunity to do so. I do not think that this would have been the right time, when there is so much instability and uncertainty surrounding the delivery of public services by local councils. Perhaps next year—I will certainly be making representations to the Chancellor to encourage him to do so.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The Secretary of State has said that it is not the right time to pursue wholesale reform of local government finance, which will be a relief to many local authorities across England. However, the threat of the reform will hang over the heads of those authorities as they work to recover from the financial difficulties of the pandemic and longer-term budget cuts. Will the Secretary of State confirm when he intends plans the reform to take place?

Robert Jenrick: I am not able to confirm when we will bring that forward. As I have said, it will not be on this occasion, but we will have to make a judgment, based

[Robert Jenrick]

on the position of local government, on whether next year would be right for, as she says, an undoubtedly significant change.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: The rural services delivery grant helps local authorities in rural areas such as Rutland and Melton to provide vital local services and, under this Government, it is the highest that it has ever been. Can my right hon. Friend confirm his intention to maintain this rural services delivery grant next year, and will he incorporate those principles into the fairer funding review, which is vital for rural authorities and communities such as mine to get their fair share?

Robert Jenrick: I shall certainly take my hon. Friend's representations forward. I know that Leicestershire colleagues, both in local government and in the House, have long advocated a fairer distribution of public funds in local government. As I have said in answer to other questions, we will undertake careful consideration of that next year.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: Covid-19 costs are expected to leave Bedford Borough Council with a funding gap of nearly £22 million by 2021-22. One councillor described the lack of a fair funding settlement as "the Government expecting councils to set balanced budgets with both hands tied behind their backs while wearing a blindfold." When will the Secretary of State realise that, to finally beat the pandemic and keep local economies going, the Government need to fund local authorities properly as promised?

Robert Jenrick: It would not be right for me to provide in public the self-reported estimate of costs supplied to us by Bedford Borough Council because that was done in confidence. None the less, across the whole country, as I have said, the sum of money that we have provided to local councils well exceeds their self-reported covid-19 expenditure. With respect to Bedford, I can say that the total funding provided this year has been £20.9 million so far. For Bedford's businesses, we have provided £27.8 million, supporting 2,300 businesses. Looking to the future and the recovery of Bedford's economy, it is likely to be a recipient of the towns fund, and it has already received £1 million in accelerated funding to support new infrastructure, skills, culture and business development.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) [V]: May I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to maintain the rural services delivery grant, which is so important in recognising the additional costs that rural councils face? Many of these councils have also seen a significant drop in income due to loss of revenue through things such as car parks and other services. Will he lay out what steps he will take to support those councils that have lost significant income during this year?

Robert Jenrick: I appreciate that this will have been a particular challenge to Cornwall Council given its array of car parks and other attractions for the tourist sector. That is why we created the sales fees and charges scheme earlier in the year, which provides 75p in the

pound to councils for losses in that regard. Already, we have paid out, I think, more than £500 million to local councils. I am sure that Cornwall Council has already benefited and will do so in the future, and it is expected that that scheme will provide over £1 billion, if not significantly more. It is without cap, and we have announced in the settlement today that we will be rolling that forward to the middle of next year. Cornwall Council will be able to rely on that to plan its future up to the summer of next year, and, of course, we all hope that people will be in Cornwall enjoying its beaches and attractions in the summer of 2021.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I am concerned that the revised housing targets will cause a north-south divide on green-belt building. These new targets could lead to a 35% increase for Sheffield. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, following the very successful consultation with the community in Sheffield to limit green-belt building, the new target will not be imposed on Sheffield? Instead of levelling up, is it his plan to level our glorious northern green belt?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady makes an interesting argument, because we on the Government Benches want to see more private sector investment going into the great cities of the midlands and the north. We want to see more homes, more urban regeneration, and more brilliant and inspired schemes coming to constituencies such as hers. That is exactly the approach we have taken with respect to the local housing need, and I respectfully ask her to show a little bit more ambition for her community. The three-year annual delivery of homes in Sheffield is 2,500 homes; the new local housing need that we have proposed is 2,800 homes, so if the hon. Lady truly believes that 300 extra homes could not be built in a great city such as Sheffield, I think she is talking it down, which I am sure is not her intention. However, under your auspices, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish her and, particularly, her mother—who has done a fantastic job leading her city over a very challenging year—a very happy Christmas?

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for this much-needed further financial support for our local authorities, which lead the local response to covid. Local government staff in Runnymede and Elmbridge Borough Councils and Surrey County Council have worked tirelessly this year to provide essential services for my constituents, and will continue to do so over Christmas and the new year break and beyond. With Runnymede and Weybridge now entering tier 3 restrictions, will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking those staff for their efforts, and agree that we must continue to support our local authorities and the fantastic work they do for our communities?

Robert Jenrick: I would be delighted to join my hon. Friend in thanking the brilliant staff at his local councils. I have been consistently delighted and impressed by the fantastic work that staff at local councils have done across the country, including my own in Newark and Sherwood, Rushcliffe and Bassetlaw, and Nottinghamshire County Council. I am sure that all of us in the House want to join together to thank them and wish them a healthy and peaceful Christmas.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): While I welcome any funding for local government, this is not enough. Enfield Council has had £193 million of cuts to funding since 2010. It has had to spend £64 million in dealing with the covid-19 emergency, yet has received less than half that from the Government, and it has not been receiving its fair share of public health funding since 2013, receiving half what neighbouring boroughs get. When will the Government level up for Enfield and give it the proper funding it deserves?

Robert Jenrick: As Secretary of State for Local Government, I am familiar with people saying that there is not enough money; that, I think, is a refrain that all of my predecessors of all parties have known. However, I do not think it is fair with respect to Enfield this year. We have provided it with £43.6 million of covid-19 funding so far. We have provided it with £44 million for its local business community, and the settlement that we are setting out today provides a further £12.5 million, taking Enfield's core spending power to a quarter of a billion pounds. That will be a 5.3% increase—a very substantial increase—for the benefit of the hon. Gentleman's council and his constituents.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): At the start of this pandemic, the Government stated that they would provide local authorities with all the support they needed to get through these challenging times. The total amount of additional Government support that Blackpool Council has received since March to support local services and businesses now stands at over £129 million, and my council's finance officers can scarcely believe that the position is so healthy at this stage. In spite of this, the temptation for many Labour-run councils, including my own, will be to go for a hefty council tax increase next year. Will my right hon. Friend join me in urging those councils to demonstrate restraint, and to make sure we consider how to get value for money from local services?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and I am very happy to give him my full support. When providing public services, local councils will need to balance their individual financial positions with the needs of their own constituents and residents—hard-working people whose incomes will be under pressure.

With respect to Blackpool Council, as my hon. Friend says, we provided it with an exceptional degree of support over the course of this year. Its core spending power is £148 million, so the sum that he quotes is very significant in that context. Some £26 billion has gone to pay for the council's covid-19 expenditure, and it is also, of course, the recipient of our first towns fund town deal, amounting to £39.5 million of investment in Blackpool. That will, I think, go in part to ensure that the Blackpool illuminations are back and brighter than ever next year.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) [V]: Council tax increases have become a stealth tax for this Government. Council tax now makes up 60% of core spending in local authorities—up from 49% just five years ago. Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that raising council tax year on year, as this Government have done, without recognising deprivation levels is, far from levelling up, leaving local authorities with high levels of deprivation, such as mine in Greenwich, further and further behind?

Robert Jenrick: As I said in response to the shadow Minister's remarks, the Government have seen a real-terms decrease in council tax compared with the position when we came to power in 2010. It was the last Labour Government who doubled council tax bills for residents throughout the country. Of course we are aware of the different tax bases of different local authorities, and that is why we have consistently provided grants to ensure that there is equalisation across the country. In this settlement, we are providing £270 million of equalisation grants to ensure that each part of the country, regardless of how wealthy or otherwise it may be, has the resources it needs to properly fund adult and children's social care and all the other important public services.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: The additional funding for local authorities such as Bromley is very welcome, and I also welcome my right hon. Friend's desire to move back to multi-year settlements as soon as possible. However, for those of us whose councils have social services responsibilities, the ongoing upward pressure of adult social care costs is perhaps the single biggest cause of financial uncertainty. There was talk and a promise of a social care Green Paper as far back as 2018, but we have not seen it yet. When will we tackle the difficult but essential task of reforming social care funding? Without that, it will be difficult to find a sustainable financial base for our authorities with those responsibilities.

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will bring forward proposals in due course. We will meet our manifesto commitment to introduce the long-term reforms that this country urgently needs on social care. I think today's settlement provides local government with the sustainable finances it needs for social care. It has been widely praised by the sector as meeting the demographic changes that my right hon. Friend mentioned. We are also ensuring that councils such as his have the funding that they need. Bromley will have a 5.5% increase in core spending power from the previous year, in which there was a 4.7% increase. That is two successive years of increases in council funding for his local authority area.

Briefly, in other news for my hon. Friend, today we have announced funding for waking watches, partly inspired by brilliant campaigners in his constituency.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I add my thanks to council staff and councillors for their work during this last year, particularly those at Durham County Council. I particularly thank the chief executive, Terry Collins, who is retiring at the end of the year after 43 years in local government.

The Secretary of State's announcement is mainly made up of local council tax increases in core spending. Durham County Council has 50% of its council tax properties in band A, which limits its ability to raise large amounts of council tax compared with councils in the south, which have larger numbers of higher-band council tax properties. That will mean that Durham County Council has no option but to increase its council tax to the maximum. The Secretary of State and the Government talk about levelling up, but today he is clearly punishing northern council tax payers while rewarding southern council tax payers.

Robert Jenrick: I join the right hon. Gentleman in thanking and praising the staff of his local council and wishing Mr Collins a happy retirement. With respect to the balance of funding across the country, I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman is mistaken. This settlement will ensure that funding is there for all councils in all parts of the country. We have taken particular care to address the issue that he raises. In fact, County Durham will receive £5.2 million in equalisation payments. That will ensure that it has a 4.5% cash and real-terms increase in core spending power, which comes on top of a 7% increase last year—very substantial increases to ensure that his constituents get good-quality public services.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and particularly the review of the effectiveness of local authority external audits. Warrington Borough Council's accounts dating back to 2017-18 still have not been signed off. Given the recent news from Croydon Council, which was effectively declared bankrupt when it issued a section 114 notice last month, does he share my concerns about Labour-controlled Warrington Council, which has debt of around £1.6 billion? Similarly to Croydon, it has used the funds to purchase a shopping centre, offices, a bank and—guess what?—an energy company. Does he agree that it is time for a Government inquiry into the level of council borrowing, which puts local services at risk and loads huge debt on to council tax payers such as my constituents in Warrington South?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We all want to see councils have access to funding at low interest rates to fund housing and regeneration within their own boundaries. We do not expect local councils to indulge in risky financial ventures, either within their own areas or beyond. That is a mistake. Many local councils quite clearly do not have the financial management skills to do that. My hon. Friend highlights at least two egregious examples of that, in Nottingham and Croydon. Warrington may well be another; I will look it up myself after this statement. We need to bear down on councils that appear to be using taxpayers' money as if it were Monopoly money and respect the individuals who actually pay the bills at the end of the day.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): We see the usual fundamental dishonesty in the Government's position: they herald an increase in spending power, but that is entirely predicated on increases in council tax, and when those increases are made, they attack councils politically for having made those increases. Can we just have a bit of honesty from the Government about the position they are driving councils into? Cheshire West and Chester has coped very well with the coronavirus pandemic, but we are still £1 million in the red. Will the Government support us with that debt?

Robert Jenrick: I will happily look into the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises, but £1 million is not a great deal of money in the context of the £39.8 million that the Government have provided for Cheshire West and Chester Council to meet its covid-19 expenditure. If that is correct, it rather suggests that we have made good our promise to ensure that that council, like every other, gets the resources it needs. In case the hon. Gentleman would like to know, the settlement for next

year for Cheshire West and Chester ensures a 4.1% cash and real-terms increase in core spending power, which builds on a 6% increase last year.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con) [V]: Conservative-led Blaby District Council is one of the best-run councils in our country. Conservative council leader Terry Richardson asked me today how the Government will compensate councils such as Blaby for the loss of the new homes bonus. For context, that is a loss to Blaby District Council of more than £1 million. If the Secretary of State does not have the answer to that specific point, will he undertake to write to me with a specific response on the data that Blaby has to work on?

Robert Jenrick: I will happily write to my hon. Friend with the full details with respect to Blaby District Council. Across the country, we have announced today that we will be doing a further year of the new homes bonus, backed by over £600 million of Government money, but we will also be consulting on its future. The new homes bonus is an important part of the finances of many local councils, but it is widely perceived to be a poor incentive for councils to get on and build homes, so the consultation will ask how we can develop a new incentive that supports those councils that need to build homes and those that have high ambitions to get on and build. Fortunately for my hon. Friend, his council and those that surround it in Leicestershire are among the most ambitious councils in the country when it comes to house building.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: Like others, I am very concerned that the increase in local authority budgets is largely predicated on an assumption of a rise in council tax and the social care precept. This tax is highly inappropriate in the current circumstances and fails to recognise the different needs of local economies such as mine in Oldham and Saddleworth. To be frank, it is just not good enough for the Secretary of State to say that it is up to local authorities what they do. When is he going to reimburse Oldham Council for its covid-associated deficit, forecast at more than £10 million in 2021-22? What will he do to fulfil the Conservative manifesto pledge to level up regarding council funding, given the disproportionate cuts that northern local authorities have faced over the last 10 years?

Robert Jenrick: As I said in answer to the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), it would not be right for me to say publicly how much a local council has self-reported as having spent on covid-19 expenditure, but across the whole country, we have more than compensated local councils for the costs they have incurred. We have provided Oldham with £33.5 million so far. In addition, it will be making use of the sales, fees and charges scheme, which provides 75p in the pound, and the council tax and business rates scheme that we have announced today, which does the same thing, so I rather suspect that Oldham will receive as much money as it requires over the course of the year. The hon. Lady did not welcome the fact that Oldham is part of the towns fund—I look forward to seeing the proposals that it brings forward—or that we provided £1 million to Oldham earlier in the year, so that it can get on and take forward some of those exciting ideas as soon as possible.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for all the support that my council has received during coronavirus. One issue that my council faces is that we raise an awful lot in business rates, given the high property values in Kensington. We get very little of that back, yet our high streets are really suffering because of the crippling level of business rates. Does he agree that we need a fundamental review of business rates?

Robert Jenrick: I join my hon. Friend in praising her local council, and in particular the excellent local council leader she is lucky to have, Elizabeth Campbell, whom it has been my pleasure to work with this year on many different issues.

My hon. Friend is right to say that business rates are a challenge. Of course, this year the Chancellor has provided a business rates holiday, which so many businesses on our local high streets have benefited from. It will be for him to decide whether or in what form that should continue into the next financial year, and no doubt he will bring forward further details on that next year. There will be a fundamental review of the future of business rates, and I am sure she will contribute to that in due course.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab) [V]: Merry Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As the Secretary of State knows full well, Newham has the highest level of homelessness in the country and the second worst level of child poverty in the country, and more than half of Newham residents are either on furlough or out of work. The crisis is getting worse. Our food banks have never known times this bad, and despite fantastic work by local charities, many of our children will be going without this Christmas. Our council has suffered drastic cuts over the past 10 years, and has even been underfunded for covid impacts by about £20 million. Can the Secretary of State assure me that the settlement will right that wrong, and if not, will he meet me and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) to discuss?

Robert Jenrick: I certainly can give the hon. Member that assurance, but equally, I would be more than happy to meet her and her right hon. Friend. She raises a number of different points. Her local council has received a great deal of money from the Government over the course of this year. It has received almost £50 million in covid-19 expenditure alone so far, in addition to the schemes I have already referred to, which will no doubt amount to many further millions of pounds. The Government have provided the council with £56 million to support 4,000 of her local businesses. She also mentions homelessness and rough sleeping, on which we have worked very closely with Newham Council—I visited a brilliant move-on accommodation site in her constituency earlier this year with the mayor—and we will be providing it with further funding next year, thanks to the £750 million that we are investing in our campaign to end rough sleeping.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish you, as my brilliant constituency neighbour across the border in Epping Forest, a happy Christmas?

My right hon. Friend knows that we are in the process of bidding for the £25 million towns fund to regenerate Harlow. Coupled with the recently announced

£50 million Harlow investment fund, does he agree that this regeneration money will completely transform our town to build an even better Harlow? Does he also agree that these regeneration funds are all the more important given the struggle that local businesses and shopkeepers have had to face because of the coronavirus pandemic, and will he confirm that every possible financial support will be given to the residents of Harlow to help us through this pandemic?

Robert Jenrick: Can I thank my right hon. Friend for his hard work over the course of this year and for the campaigns we have worked on together? Not least of those is the decision he campaigned on for many years to institute national space standards for new homes built under permitted development rights, which I think will make a great deal of difference in Harlow, as across the country. He is right to highlight the many ways in which the Government are supporting Harlow—through the towns fund, which is bringing forward very exciting and welcome proposals, and also through the work of Homes England in my Department, which is putting £240 million towards the new garden village to provide much-needed housing and further town centre regeneration for his local community. I look forward to visiting Harlow, I am sure, next year and seeing the results.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Would the Secretary of State look again at suspending, even if temporarily, the no recourse to public funds rule? He mentioned a number of groups who have been removed from that rule. I still deal with constituents day in and day out who have that rule inflicted upon them, and of course many are on zero-hours contracts, which means their work disappears literally overnight.

Robert Jenrick: I am very alive to this issue. The Government's position has not changed and the law remains as it has been, but as I said in answer to a previous question, we have done two things this year that are significant: extending the derogation, which enables councils to support EEA nationals in this country who find themselves on the streets, and allowing councils to use the discretion they have under the law to support those where there is a risk to life. Many councils, I suspect the hon. Member's among them, have used that discretion to support vulnerable rough sleepers who do not have recourse to public funds during the virus. Many of the 29,000 individuals we brought in off the streets under Everyone In were people who lacked recourse to public funds, and those people are by and large being supported by councils to this day.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and for his announcement a couple of days ago about support for councils with outsourced leisure centres. Even with that income, Amber Valley Borough Council's finances are in a pretty terrible state. Does he believe that the two-tier council system will survive this crisis, and will he be encouraging areas to work out how upper and lower-tier councils can work together more closely to save money?

Robert Jenrick: Earlier in the year, I laid a written ministerial statement that set out the Government's position with respect to local government reorganisation. It remains my view that, where there is local support,

[Robert Jenrick]

councils should consider further reorganisation to drive the sorts of efficiencies my hon. Friend speaks of, but there must be support for that within the local community. It is not the Government's intention to impose it on parts of the country where it does not work for the character and nature of local government. We have taken forward three propositions—one in Cumbria, one in Somerset and one in North Yorkshire. Bids for those have been submitted to me, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government and I will be making decisions on that early in the new year.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Public health teams have been a key part of the response to the covid crisis, but the King's Fund reports that the public health grant settlement last year was 22% lower per head than it was for 2015-16. How does the Secretary of State plan to address that?

Robert Jenrick: We have provided exceptional resources both to the NHS and to local authorities over the course of the year, so the suggestion that public health has not been resourced this year is not correct. We have been providing huge sums of money to support the increasingly important role of directors of public health in local councils and the teams that are around them. With respect to Birmingham, we have provided £177 million of covid-19 expenditure funding already, much of which will have gone to support the sort of work that the hon. Gentleman is talking about, including through the infection control programmes.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement today. May I ask him to inform the House how local authorities such as Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council can continue to benefit from local settlement schemes? Furthermore, what steps is his Department taking to encourage local councils such as DMBC to ensure that they bid for funding in a timely manner and spend money in an equitable way?

Robert Jenrick: The resettlement programme is resuming early in the new year after an understandable pause as a result of covid-19, and we will ensure that it is properly resourced so that it can continue to fulfil its important function. With respect to local councils, it is important that they apply for the funds that are made available to them. We have produced a number of schemes over the last couple of years, including the towns fund and the high streets fund. Next year, we will be bringing forward the £4 billion levelling-up fund, and it is my intention that we make the application and competition procedures as simple as possible so that local councils can succeed. My hon. Friend has a good council in his constituency, and I have worked closely with Damian Allen, its excellent chief executive. It has benefited from the towns fund on two occasions, and I hope to support it in future.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I want to start by thanking all the staff at Gateshead Council, who have done an absolutely magnificent job in responding to the pandemic and being hugely flexible. I also want to return to the theme of public health that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) raised,

because this year more than any other has shown the importance of public health services. They have been vital in helping to limit the spread of covid-19 and responding to the pandemic. We know that the pandemic has exposed the impact of health inequalities on those who contract covid-19 and on their response to it, yet there was nothing in the statement about public health. Can the Secretary of State tell the House what conversations he has had with Cabinet colleagues about public health funding for next year?

Robert Jenrick: The question that the hon. Lady asks is primarily for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, but what I would say, building on my remarks of a few moments ago, is that public health has been significantly invested in over the course of this year as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. The public health grant for local councils has to be viewed in the round, including the sums of money that we have been providing to directors of public health for infection control, for personal protective equipment and for support for care homes across the country. That includes her own local council, which has received £28 million of covid-19 expenditure already.

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) [V]: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the continued generous financial support offered to our local authorities. Burton has recently submitted its town investment plan, which is a joined-up plan to renew our high street, expand sustainable travel and enhance the skills of our young people. Will my right hon. Friend grant us our £25 million Christmas wish, which would truly level up Burton for the future?

Robert Jenrick: I look forward to receiving the proposals for my hon. Friend's towns fund bid. We will be making further announcements on that early next year, and nothing would give me greater pleasure than to support the towns in her constituency.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I want to ask the Secretary of State about funding for our hard-working firefighters, including the London Fire Brigade. They have seen a 38% cut in central Government funding since 2010 and 11,200 fewer firefighters during the same period. The workload for our firefighters continues to increase as they are now expected to monitor and keep safe a built environment with previously unidentified risk, inspecting over 8,000 high rises, including many in my Vauxhall constituency. So is it fair that the Government are forcing the LFB and other fire authorities to shoulder these costs?

Robert Jenrick: I think the hon. Lady's question is better directed to the Minister with responsibility for the fire service, who laid a written ministerial statement earlier today specifically with respect to the police and fire settlements. More broadly, I join her in thanking fire and rescue services across the country for the fantastic work they do day in, day out and have done throughout the pandemic, and the work they are doing with my Department with respect to building safety issues.

I heard the hon. Lady's question earlier to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House with respect to waking watch. She might like to know that earlier today we announced a £30 million fund, which will be available

to those in any building faced with egregious waking watch costs, so they can pay for fire alarm systems to be installed. That should bring those costs to an end, or at the very least significantly reduce them, and mean the beginning of the end of terrible rip-off practices that have put huge stress and anxiety on leaseholders.

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

Points of Order

2.16 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Have you received any indication from the Secretary of State for Education of when his statement regarding pupils' return to school in January and the roll-out of mass testing in schools will be put before this House? Last night we saw contradictory briefings to the media. Today, the Health Secretary in this Chamber and the permanent secretary to the Department for Education at her appearance before the Public Accounts Committee said there would be an announcement, but there is still no clarity.

Pupils are due to break up for the Christmas holidays tonight, if they have not already done so. Tomorrow is to be an inset day. Parents, teachers and school staff need to know what is going to happen in January and what support they will receive to make it happen. They deserve better from this incompetent Government. Do you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, when and whether we may expect a statement on the matter from the Secretary of State for Education?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me advance notice of her intention to raise the matter. If a Minister wished to make a statement, had notified Mr Speaker accordingly and a statement was to be made, the House would have been informed. As she knows, Mr Speaker is very anxious that statements are made first to the House and not to the media. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have noted her concerns and will convey them back to the relevant Department.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, in his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), was very clear that the Secretary of State for Education is to make an announcement on schools. I have been inundated—I am sure many other right hon. and hon. Members have been, too—with emails, letters and correspondence from parents and teachers concerned about what is happening in schools. I know Mr Speaker is very clear that statements should be made here and not outside. I therefore wonder whether, through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker could this afternoon inquire at the Department for Education whether or not a statement is going to be made to the House this afternoon, because this is causing great anxiety among our constituents.

Madam Deputy Speaker: There is very little I can add to what I said previously, but of course I will convey back the various points that have been made. As I said, I am sure those on the Treasury Bench will convey the points back to the Department as well.

We will have a three-minute suspension to allow for the safe exit and entry of hon. and right hon. Members.

2.19 pm

Sitting suspended.

ADJOURNMENT (CHRISTMAS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising this day, do adjourn until Tuesday 5 January 2021.—(*Tom Pursglove.*)

Question agreed to.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS (SECURITY) BILL: PROGRAMME (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the Order of 30 November 2020 (Telecommunications (Security) Bill: Programme) be varied as follows:

In paragraph (2) of the Order (conclusion of proceedings in Public Bill Committee), for “Tuesday 19 January” substitute “Thursday 28 January”.—(*Tom Pursglove.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day’s sitting, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until he has notified the Royal Assent to any Act agreed upon by both Houses.—(*Tom Pursglove.*)

Christmas Adjournment

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.—(*Tom Pursglove.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I would rather not put a time limit on, but that will require Members not taking more than eight minutes for their speeches. I call Jack Lopresti.

2.24 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I will be as brief as I can, and well under the eight minutes, I think, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Before I raise a couple of constituency issues, I would like to offer my sincere thanks to all the House staff—the policemen, doorkeepers, catering staff; virtually everyone who works here—who have done so much to support us during this difficult year so that we can continue to work as safely as we can. We must not forget that they come here at some risk to themselves, given that every week we travel in from all over the country. So we are very grateful, and I wish them a happy and restful Christmas.

The first issue I would like to raise is the matter of the M49 Severnside junction. Before the 2015 election, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) and representatives from South Gloucestershire Council, I began a campaign for a link road to connect the M49 directly to the Severnside enterprise and distribution area. The link road will unlock thousands of jobs in the area, which already has a number of significant distribution centres, such as Amazon, Royal Mail and GKN Aerospace.

The junction was almost completed by Highways England at the end of 2019, at a cost, so far, of £50 million to the taxpayer. Much to my astonishment, however, the project has not been completed because there was no legal undertaking whatsoever for Highways England, the developer and the landowner to complete the project by building the link roads to the motorway. I cannot understand how planning permission was granted without the securing of a legal undertaking from the developer to build the necessary roads to connect this junction to the motorway, which would, as I said, not only unlock local jobs, but relieve the traffic in small villages around the area, such as Easter Compton and Pilning, which would help with the environment and traffic disturbance. It would also potentially unlock a fantastic opportunity, with the freeports and Brexit, to build thousands of good, sustainable jobs.

I have written to transport Ministers and had a meeting with the Secretary of State for Transport, who has personally written to the developer asking for an update and a timescale. There has been so far no response and no progress, and this unfinished project is just sitting there. It must be completed; I cannot and will not allow the situation to continue any longer if I can prevent it. In the new year, I will seek a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to see whether we can exert some pressure and get this project—this fantastic opportunity—completed, not only for all the benefits I have mentioned, but for the considerable money spent by the taxpayer.

The second matter I wish to raise, with associated issues, is defence spending. Filton and Bradley Stoke and the west of England region is a centre of excellence for the aerospace and defence industries. In my constituency, at least 20,000 people's jobs are directly linked to aerospace and defence. The south-west of England's aerospace cluster is the largest in Europe, and the UK's aerospace industry is the second largest in the world.

The announcement that the Government will honour their pledge to continue to invest in this country's armed forces is hugely welcome. The pledge of £16.5 billion over four years, combined with the manifesto commitment to a 0.5% uplift, means that the total increase for defence is a substantial £24.1 billion. Thus, if the defence budget for this year is £42.6 billion, by 2024 it will be £54 billion. That will ensure that we can keep the UK safe and confirm our place as the second largest contributor in the NATO alliance and the largest in Europe.

The increase will also help to secure hundreds of jobs in my constituency and investment in our future capability. It will allow us to enhance and maintain our vital strategic sovereign defence manufacturing capability. It means that we will continue to be a reliable partner to our allies and friends around the world and, importantly, able to conduct operations in our own right unilaterally. This is not just about exporting hard power; it is about soft power, our values and humanitarian operations as much as about safeguarding our homeland.

I promised to be brief. Related directly to defence spend is the Tempest programme, which I welcome and thank the Government for their ongoing commitment to. The programme is essentially the development of the next generation of fighter aircraft, which will ensure that the UK can retain its world-leading position in combat aerospace and guarantee freedom of action. As I have said, hundreds of jobs in my constituency will be protected and increased over the years of its development. It has brought together BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, MBDA and other European partners. That is fantastic news, and not only for our strategic defence capability. My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), the Deputy Chief Whip, who is sitting in front of me, is a former Defence Minister and has visited my constituency regarding this programme. I thank him for that.

On a related theme, I will continue to be a candid friend. I am bearing in mind that the Deputy Chief Whip is sitting there listening to every word, although he is my proxy so I cannot really do much damage at the moment. I would like to address the question of the UK's aerospace early warning capability. We undertook to purchase five E-7 Wedgetail aircraft, which will help to protect our aerospace and our national deterrent, and will be part of our vital AEW&C—airborne early warning and control—working with our colleagues across the world, and in NATO in particular. Will the Government therefore use the additional flexibility and the extra money granted by a multi-year settlement to revisit the decision to reduce our initial order of five to three? The reduced number will adversely affect our ability to support our NATO allies as well as to protect our own skies.

Finally, I pay tribute to all the NHS workers, care workers and other key workers in my constituency for the work they have done in the past 12 months. I have

been so inspired and impressed by the way that our small communities have worked together, looking after and taking extra care in minding our neighbours and friends. They, the faith groups, the churches and the voluntary sector have done an amazing job. We have all worked together and looked after one another, and I pay tribute to everyone for that. I wish everybody a very happy, peaceful and safe Christmas.

2.31 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to all librarians and other staff working in the public library services across our nation, and of course in my constituency of Stockport. Research tells us that public libraries are a vital part of our social infrastructure. They empower and equalise our communities. They strengthen communities, improve digital inclusion, and help with everything from physical and mental health to cultural engagement, literacy, diversity, inclusion, and of course education. I am incredibly proud of the library staff in my borough of Stockport. They do an important job and are a key part of our community. The Central Library in the heart of my constituency is grade II listed, internally and externally, and is one of the original Carnegie-funded libraries, built in 1913. My town has a beautiful heritage and iconic buildings, from the Victorian viaduct, to the Central Library, to the outstanding Underbanks.

Sadly, a combination of covid and years of central Government underfunding have forced many local authorities to close public libraries and reduce the offer available to communities. Of course, public health must come first and foremost, but we must recognise the positive impact that public libraries make on the wellbeing of our constituents. It is evident that we need a fair financial settlement from the Government so that local authorities can continue to support libraries and all public services. I welcome the statement made earlier in the Chamber, but, as ever, the devil is in the detail, and we need to make sure that the funding is available to all councils rather than just to specific shires. I have a record of campaigning against Government austerity policies over the past decade, and this terrible pandemic has highlighted the need to support our local authorities properly.

Turning to another issue—I will be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker—I would like to start by commending the work of John Gurr, co-ordinator of the Western Sahara Campaign, and the all-party parliamentary group on Western Sahara. They have done a lot of work to raise awareness of this issue. I would also like to pay tribute to the chair of the all-party parliamentary group, the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), for his years of activism on this issue and tireless efforts to resolve this long-running dispute. Unfortunately he is not able to be here today to speak on this matter, but he wanted me to mention the work of the APPG.

The situation in Western Sahara is at tipping point and is becoming increasingly desperate for the region and its people. The conflict has had devastating humanitarian consequences. It is now 45 years since the displacement of the Sahrawi people, which has resulted in more than 180,000 Saharwi refugees living on international aid in bleak camps in south-western Algeria, almost entirely dependent on aid to survive. The Moroccan-Western Sahara wall that separates the two sides spans

[Navendu Mishra]

more than 2,700 km and is reinforced by military bases, artillery posts and airfields that run the length of the wall.

Despite that, both sides have respected a ceasefire agreement for almost 30 years. However, military clashes erupted last month between the Moroccan army and the Polisario Front, and tensions have been further stoked by the US Government's decision to recognise Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed region. President Trump's message to the United Nations was not only a departure from long-standing US foreign policy in Western Sahara; it rode roughshod over the inalienable rights of the people of Sahara to self-determination, and furthermore it is a breach of United Nations Security Council Resolution 377, which was passed in the year 1975. The US Government's reckless decision to recognise Morocco's sovereignty over the territory risks even more fighting between the Polisario Front and Moroccan troops and puts tens of thousands of lives at risk. It is imperative that international law be respected and that disputes are resolved peacefully. The US Government's wading into this conflict not only makes the region more unstable and jeopardises the ongoing negotiations, but moves a peaceful resolution further away.

International charities and human rights organisations have been unanimous in their condemnation of President Trump's declaration. Indeed, Oxfam's country director for Algeria said:

"The implications of this move—ironically made on Human Rights Day—by the US Government will be severe. Only one month ago we witnessed the first collapse of the ceasefire between Morocco and Frente Polisario in 29 years—the peace process is moving backwards, not forwards."

The International Crisis Group voiced similar concerns. Its north Africa director stated:

"I think we can safely say that this move makes the resolution of the current bout of violence much harder. This will also make Sahrawi youths more angry, mobilised and committed to resolving the conflict through force."

It is further concerning that Amnesty International stated last month that access to the territory for human rights monitors and independent journalists has become increasingly difficult, restricting their ability to monitor the crisis. This is particularly troubling given the recent reports from local organisations monitoring the human rights situation in Western Sahara that last month's conflict was followed up with a crackdown on peaceful Saharawi activists by Moroccan police, including raids on homes, increased surveillance and arrests.

It is vital that a United Nations personal envoy for Western Sahara be appointed immediately. The failure by the United Nations Secretary-General to appoint an envoy for over 18 months has left a vacuum in the diplomatic leadership and enabled the situation to deteriorate. It is clear that restarting the political negotiation process is essential for regional stability and will be the most effective way to avoid any further escalation of the conflict.

Our Government must do all they can to support efforts to halt the current conflict and prevent further loss of life. The Foreign Secretary has stated that the UK's position on Western Sahara remains unchanged and it continues to support the right to self-determination; however, the Government must go further in condemning the intervention by President Trump and supporting efforts to deliver a just settlement for the Saharawi people.

To finish, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you, and all the members of the staff of the House, who work so hard, a very happy Christmas. Their dedication empowers us to represent our constituents. I hope you have a restful and peaceful Christmas break.

2.37 pm

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this debate to mark the Christmas Adjournment. I am particularly delighted that my hon. Friend the Deputy Chief Whip is on the Treasury Bench. He is a very close friend of mine and I have known him for many years, but I do not get to interact with him much in the House, other than when he tries to tell me off—or does tell me off—in the Whips Office. I look forward to giving him a slightly hard time this afternoon, with lots of long lists of what my constituents need—but not too long, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Perhaps in this debate my hon. Friend will be tempted to give me some positive news, although I do not expect that to continue for the rest of my career, particularly not good news from a Whip. None the less, I hope that this afternoon he will be able to give me good news on some of the things I want. He will not be surprised to hear that I have a few things to raise with the Government about what is going on in my constituency.

Of course, the first subject I have to talk about is the covid pandemic. It goes without saying that I pay tribute to all the health workers and businesses in my constituency who have struggled and worked really hard to make sure that the people of Eastleigh and Hampshire have the health services they need in my constituency and the wider region. The Health Secretary's announcement this morning on the further tiers was welcome. I am pleased that calls from colleagues from across Hampshire for a splitting of geographical regions in the county were followed through. However, Eastleigh is sitting at 50 to 60 cases per 100,000 people and is the only place in Hampshire not currently seeing an increase among the over-60s, so may I gently say to the Deputy Chief Whip that I expect my region and constituency to remain under constant review? We need to drop a tier, and my constituents expect that to happen as soon as possible.

That brings me to the businesses in my constituency, which have invested thousands—hundreds of thousands—of pounds in making their businesses and their premises covid-secure. Of course it was welcome when, a couple of weeks ago, the Government announced further assistance for the hospitality sector, in particular wet-led pubs and small breweries, but businesses in my constituency such as the Steam Town Brew Company, the CrackleRock Brewing Company and the Botley Brewery need more support. The £1,000 was welcome, but they need further support, especially those that had previously invested to make sure that their businesses could continue. Perhaps the Deputy Chief Whip might like to speak to the Treasury in future so that we can see whether we can continue small brewery business rate relief as we go forward. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] That sounds very popular, so perhaps it might happen.

My constituency is not different from any other constituencies in the country, and we desperately need infrastructure. The Deputy Chief Whip will remember that I raised this issue in my maiden speech. My Liberal Democrat borough council has not had a sustainable

housing local plan for over a decade, and it buys land and develops it itself. I do not have a problem with that, but when there is a lack of a sustainable local plan, the land is open to speculative developments, often put forward by the borough council. I am raising the possibility of the Deputy Chief Whip asking the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about this so that his Department starts to take a stronger line on local authorities that are not developing local plans. It is fair to say that a local plan process now in place. The local plan proposed by the Liberal Democrat council was found to be unsound, and 5,000 houses were not built on ancient woodland in Bishopstoke, which is welcome, but the current local plan process is painfully slow. The council is not delivering on that local plan, and speculative developments are being accepted on green belt right across the constituency.

While I welcome housing and want it to be built, I just say to the Deputy Chief Whip that I did get an early Christmas present when we heard that there was a change in emphasis on the housing algorithm going forward. He will acknowledge my feelings on the housing algorithm. This is certainly welcome, but tougher interaction from the Department on local plans would be very welcome.

When houses come, there has to be further infrastructure, and there are two particular things that I want to raise today on behalf of my constituency. The first is the levelling-up fund. I strongly welcomed that emphasis from the Chancellor when it was announced, but can I ask for a reassurance that southern constituencies will receive equal weighting if they bring forward a bid to Government and the Treasury on infrastructure projects—

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): You're fired.

Paul Holmes: My hon. Friend just said "You're fired" from a sedentary position. I am not in that situation yet, but we will see.

I would like to know whether there will be an equal weight on bids put in by southern constituencies. Since the 1980s, my constituents in Eastleigh have been promised the Chickenhall Lane road link—I mentioned this in my maiden speech—which would ease congestion in an incredibly tight geographical area in the town centre. Given the added housing, we need that. I am ready to bring forward a bid. The county council is ready to bring forward a bid. The borough council is willing to bring a bid forward, and I hope that that would be looked on favourably.

The other thing, when more houses come, is that transport links need to improve. The number of people using Hedge End railway station is increasing because our ex-villages are now becoming small towns. We applied for funding for the station to have accessibility, because at the moment my constituents have to travel down the M27 to go to either Southampton Airport Parkway or Eastleigh train station. It is not good for people with disabilities or people who are not able-bodied if they have to drive down the M27 to get access to London or further into south Hampshire, particularly when the Government's green agenda, which is completely welcome, is not being helped by that extra motorway usage. I hope that Hedge End station will be looked on favourably in future funding rounds. The Government can be sure that I will be standing up and asking about that issue again.

On a more important issue, I have raised before the plight of independent lifeboat stations, such as the Hamble lifeboat station in my constituency. It has struggled through a lack of fundraising because of the pandemic and the expenses incurred with PPE, all while operating as normal to keep one of the UK's busiest waterways safe. I have previously called for the rescue boat grant fund, which was extremely welcome, to be reinstated to help independent lifeboat stations. My hon. Friends the Members for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) and for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) and I are looking to try to establish an independent lifeboat station commission so that we can try to get the funding necessary for that issue.

Lastly—you will be glad to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker—this year has been completely out of the ordinary for me, serving my first year as a Member in this House. It has been extraordinary because unprecedented demand has been placed on our staff by constituents—quite rightly, because they needed help. I pay tribute to all Members' staff, particularly my staff Sue, Ben, Charlie and Emma, who have worked tirelessly at all hours to try to get people's issues sorted. More importantly—they will not like me saying that—I pay tribute to the Doorkeepers, parliamentary staff and security staff, who have made me feel particularly welcome in my first year. They have helped me and colleagues from all parts of the House to settle in. I pay tribute to the staff in the Tea Room, who constantly put up with my pleas that I am on a diet when I order my red velvet cake, which is very good. They serve it without judgment, and they never remind me that I am on a diet, despite my putting on the parliamentary stone in my first year.

I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Speaker, all Members of this House and all staff in this House an incredibly safe Christmas, but hopefully a better year when we all come back together in 2021.

2.45 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I smile wryly to myself as the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) talks about being on a diet. He can look at me and see how it fails after 15 years. Clearly I need to take a leaf out of his book. The cycling in is clearly not working yet, but I live in hope.

There are some very important issues to raise, and I am glad to have the chance in this debate to raise issues affecting my constituency and the country as a whole. One of the key issues affecting many householders in my constituency is unsafe cladding on tower blocks and leasehold properties. In the early '90s, Hackney demolished a lot of council housing stock in high-rise flats that had not lasted well. Between Birmingham, Glasgow and Hackney, we had more high rises than any other part of the country. We demolished those, but they have been replaced with private sector leasehold properties.

I must declare an interest in that I live in one of those properties. I am affected by the issue of fire-safe cladding, but the developer that built my block is funding its entire removal, so I am not financially affected. That is a blessing for me, but most of my constituents affected by this issue are not in that happy situation.

[Meg Hillier]

The Government have announced a total over the past few years of £1.6 billion to remove cladding in the light of the Grenfell tragedy. The first tranche was to remove the same type of cladding as was on Grenfell, and the next tranche was to recognise that other cladding is also unsafe and needs removing. There was, however, no new money in the spending review this year, which alarms me, because that £1.6 billion was effectively reannounced. That is a little trick I am aware of as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. I say this to be helpful to Members on the Government Benches: beware a figure brandished by a Minister in this House, because usually it is not as simple as they suggest. The £1.6 billion available to remove cladding is exactly that; it has already been announced. We had the cladding fund announced in March just before the pandemic really kicked off, which was £1 billion on top of the £0.6 billion that was previously put forward and had mostly been spent. There have been bids for the £1 billion, but it is about a 10th of what is needed to replace the cladding.

I have hundreds of constituents—there are thousands up and down the country—who are trapped in homes that are technically valueless and that they cannot sell or get permission to do anything on, even if they are less risky, because they need certain bits of paperwork, such as the infamous EWS1 form. It is clearly a bigger issue than the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government can solve on its own. Its budget alone will not resolve this. We need a proper cross-Government review of how these people are going to be supported.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Ind): I alert the Government to a not unrelated problem, which is not about fire safety but about the plans to allow extra storeys to be built on top of high-rise blocks. Before the Government announced their plan, it happened to the block in which I live. We had a floor built above us. The builders then declared themselves bankrupt, and all sorts of charges are being levied on the innocent leaseholders who are having to fork out for faults that were not of their own making.

Meg Hillier: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point that underlines the longer-term need for leasehold reform. I welcome the fact that the Government are committed to doing that. We have obviously had a lot of upheaval this year, but it is something that we all need to work on. Many people now live in leasehold properties and need protection.

We all need to join forces, and I will join forces with anyone, in this House and beyond, to try to persuade the Treasury, and perhaps the Prime Minister too—that is the level of the decision that will have to be made—to provide the funding. There are really only three ways to do it: through finance vehicles, although they can affect mortgages, as we can imagine people having to take out a loan or a charge on their property; as a direct grant, which would cost the taxpayer, but I cannot see much alternative given the fact that this consumer and fire-safety failure is the biggest in a generation; or the sector pays, which I would love to see, but we would have to wait.

I applaud the former Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire),

for getting a ministerial direction for the first tranche of fire-safety money because he knew that it would take so long to track down the owners of properties and so much legal cost would be involved that it would not be feasible. He recognised that, so I urge the Government to recognise it too, and to come to the rescue of my constituents who are waiting. It is an uncertain year and an uncertain Christmas and, as it stands, there is no further money for the 12 months after March next year.

Let me touch on the issue of schooling, and particularly the issues relating to covid. It has been a really challenging year for our schools and all the staff working in them, and of course the parents and pupils are affected too. When schools had to stop teaching physically, for the most part, there were not enough laptops. No one could have predicted that we would need quite so many so fast, but the Government continually overpromised and underdelivered on the laptops and other necessary equipment. Many constituents of mine—around a third of them overall, although the number fluctuates, particularly with more people going on to benefits at the moment—are on free school meals. They do not all have access to wi-fi or equipment at home to work on, so pupils have been working on their parents' mobile phones that are on contract, not on data-rich wi-fi. This has had a real impact: the gap between the richest and poorest students is getting wider in a constituency where for 20 years we have been shrinking that gap. A number of my local schools are in the top 1% in the country.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that to connect to the Government's Oak National Academy on pay-as-you-go costs something like £37 a day?

Meg Hillier: I gasp, because most of my constituents do not have £37 left at the end of the month, let alone to spend every day on wi-fi. It is a real problem. I have poverty in my constituency—people see the trendy side of Shoreditch and Hackney, and there is wealth, but there is also immense poverty—but there is no poverty of ambition, and children have been doing very well at school. We need to make sure that the catch-up money is available. The permanent secretary at the Department for Education gave a commitment today that she would do everything in her power, but we know that her power is limited unless funding is available to make sure that the tutoring and catch-up is in place.

Jonathan Gullis: Will the hon. Lady support the campaign that I have been working on alongside the IT provider Cuckoo, which is calling on the Treasury to look at defining broadband as an essential item and reducing VAT on it to 5%? We are led to believe that that would save on average £70 per household, which is a small but still significant saving for many families.

Meg Hillier: The hon. Gentleman and I sing from the same hymn sheet: broadband needs to be seen as an essential service. The Public Accounts Committee has looked at the idea. Government after Government have not quite got there with getting broadband fully rolled out, but it is vital. It is heartening that during the height of the pandemic, broadband did hold up for those who had it; my particular concern is for the people who do not have it.

The exams fiasco this year has really hit young people hard. The Government need to be really clear about their plans for next year. My key ask of the Government is that information is clear and timely. We have seen too many Saturday-night or Friday-night announcements from No. 10 Downing Street about what will happen in schools on the next school day. That does not leave enough time for headteachers and school leaders to plan and makes it impossible for parents, especially if they are working. We should remember that many parents will not earn money if they do not go to work: they do not get the luxury of paid leave, parental leave or work that they can do from home, although that is hard enough for people with children at home.

There seems to be a real gap between Whitehall and the centre of Government and the reality on the ground for parents, pupils and teachers. The Government really have to get a grip on this issue. Only this morning, the permanent secretary was unable to tell the Public Accounts Committee what would happen in schools on 4 or 5 January. While we were in the Committee, it was being laid out by various journalists who had clearly been briefed, but we were not able to get answers from the very top civil servant. That is ludicrous. This was a chance for parliamentarians of all parties—admittedly, a small group of us on the Public Accounts Committee—to ask direct questions. It seems that, as it stands, we will not have that opportunity today, on the last day that Parliament sits. We need earlier decisions and clarity on decisions, and, crucially, school leaders need to be involved, because the logistics are vital.

I want to touch on some of the issues with tier 3 and covid. What concerns me, as I see Manchester and Leicester still in tier 3, is whether there is any understanding of the route out. My constituency, in London, went into tier 3 at a fast pace on Tuesday night, and that followed a 10 o'clock curfew for hospitality, which hit my constituency very badly. When I challenged Ministers and the Prime Minister on the rationale behind the 10 o'clock curfew, I got the impression that it was rather subjective, which was very much proved by the introduction of an 11 o'clock curfew later. The Government should give some trust to the businesses in my patch; they are well run, well organised and can manage to run a very controlled environment inside if they are given the opportunity. We have also seen a huge impact on the creative industries, particularly the forgotten freelancers. I have a large number of them in my constituency, many of whom have not received a penny since March. They are living on fresh air, and it is unacceptable. We need a clear route map out of tier 3, and I look forward to that.

My final point is about Brexit. What a shambles. We are here today on 17 December. The Government—the Prime Minister, indeed—offered and promised an oven-ready deal. As I stand here today, we do not even have a cold turkey coming out of the negotiations. The Public Accounts Committee has 13 times now, in different reports, raised concerns about preparedness. With 14 days to go, it will be a miracle if anyone is prepared for the chaos that could ensue.

3.56 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Let me begin by associating myself with the words of the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, particularly about cladding and about getting London out of tier 3 as soon as we can.

Madam Deputy Speaker, 2020 was not quite the year we envisaged, particularly for me as a first-time Member of this House. It is important that we remember that behind all the statistics we have heard, at many Christmas dinner tables this year a loved one—a family member or a friend—will not be sitting in their chair because they have been taken from us too soon by this terrible virus. Of course, our collective national effort this year has been about tackling coronavirus. Of the 10,000 bits of casework that have come through my mailbox this past year, the overwhelming majority have been related to the pandemic in some way. I hope that this Christmas we will remember those we lost too soon, and I also want to pay tribute to our frontline workers—those in the NHS but also those in all the other essential services who kept going throughout the pandemic—for everything they have done for us this year.

As well as tackling coronavirus and the issues related to it, I have not been deterred from standing up on the issues that the residents of Carshalton and Wallington elected me to raise a year ago. One of those is jobs and the local economy. Even before the pandemic, residents were raising with me concerns about how long shops would stay empty on our local high streets. That was not just in our main shopping centres, such as Carshalton High Street and Woodcote Road in Wallington, but on our small shopping broadways that are so often forgotten, such as Hackbridge, the Rose Hill roundabout, the Circle, Beddington, Carshalton Beeches, the Mount in Clockhouse, Wallington Green and others. I have spoken in this place many times about support for businesses, and the support that the Government have put in place during the pandemic has been unprecedented, and incredibly welcome. I want our local economy not just to survive but to thrive once the pandemic has passed, so in 2021 I intend to work with the local businesses to push for the improvement funding that is needed and to use tools such as business improvement districts, so that businesses can get together and show what they can do to help themselves to bounce back after the pandemic.

Transport is another major concern for residents, and was before the pandemic. Obviously, passenger numbers on our public transport networks are incredibly low. I think you may even have been in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, during my Adjournment debate back in June. You may have heard me speak about the fact that despite being in a London borough, Carshalton and Wallington is incredibly poorly connected compared with the rest of London. During that debate, I drew attention to the need for additional investment in public transport infrastructure. Our excellent candidate for the London Assembly, Neil Garratt, has shone a light on some of the astonishing statistics on public transport in Carshalton and Wallington, not least the fact that Sutton consistently comes last for investment from City Hall compared with all other London boroughs. Projects such as the Tramlink extension and the Go Sutton bus, which have been fought for for so long, now have a very bleak future indeed.

We have had some good news. This year we commenced the National Rail consultation on the Croydon bottleneck scheme, which, if it goes ahead, will unlock additional rail capacity in suburban London, including Carshalton, Wallington, Hackbridge and Carshalton Beeches stations. On top of that, Transport for London is running

[*Elliot Colburn*]

consultations on improvements to the local bus network. In 2021, I will continue to work with our London Assembly team to push for those improvements.

I will also work with local councillors to hold the council to account over failures in its road closure schemes, which are causing chaos on local roads. One concern is about the impact that these schemes have on the local environment, as air pollution builds up when traffic starts backing up on main roads. That is not a new worry; protecting our green spaces and cleaning up air pollution has long been a concern, not just during the pandemic, as more and more people are using their cars.

The Beddington incinerator is the best example I can give. The incinerator can be seen from many points across my constituency, and I have raised it in the House many times this year. It is partly because of the incinerator that I want to see more air quality monitoring stations across the constituency, especially near the site, so that residents can access independently gathered, real-time data about the air that they are breathing. We have heard a willingness to install one near the site, so I hope that the council and the operating company will deliver on that promise.

Linked to that, I want to continue to stand up for our fabulous local green spaces. Indeed, Sutton is one of the greenest boroughs in London. Whether it be fighting the council's previous proposals to build on Wellfield open space, build a school at Sheen Way or put a Traveller site at Roundshaw playing fields, I will continue to protect our green spaces and fight to enhance them—for example, by delivering the promised Beddington Farmlands projects and protecting parks from overdevelopment, so that our residents can enjoy the open space and our children can be sure that they are breathing cleaner air.

One of the best things that we can give our children is a good or outstanding local school to go to. Carshalton and Wallington is lucky to be home to some of the best schools in the country. Indeed, some of our grammar schools, such as Wallington County Grammar School, Wilson's School and Wallington High School for Girls often appear at Nos. 1, 2 and 3 in the league tables. I benefited from an excellent education at Carshalton Boys Sports College, and I want every local child to have that same opportunity, but we simply do not have enough secondary school places in Sutton to cope with the demand. I hope that the Planning Inspectorate will decide next year to approve planning permission for a new secondary school at Rosehill, which the council is currently trying to block, so that we can build the schools that our children need and give every local child a good or outstanding local school place.

Another issue that has been a concern throughout the pandemic and before it is crime and antisocial behaviour. Carshalton and Wallington is statistically one of the safest parts of London, but the pandemic has shone a light on an increasing number of incidents, especially of catalytic converter theft, pet theft, vehicle-related crime, antisocial behaviour and, tragically, domestic violence. The increase in police officers in London is incredibly welcome, and I am glad that Sutton will benefit from that uplift. Working closely with the local police, I hope that we can find the people behind these

organised crimes and encourage a greater police presence in some of our worst-affected areas, such as the St Helier estate and Roundshaw.

However, the biggest issue, not just during the pandemic but for many years, has been our amazing local hospital, St Helier. As a former NHS worker who was born at St Helier, and as the hospital saved my fiancé's life last year, I make no apology for making St Helier the No. 1 thing that I will be fighting for. Even before I was elected. I was making the case with my hon. Friends the Members for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) and for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) that St Helier needed investment and that we needed a third local hospital to complement Epsom and St Helier Hospitals.

Our local hospital has been there for us during the pandemic. I am therefore delighted that the Government have listened to the calls and backed the NHS with a £500 million investment in Epsom and St Helier Hospitals. That half a billion pound package will not just upgrade Epsom and St Helier to become modern, 21st-century healthcare facilities, but build a third, purpose-built, state-of-the-art new hospital to provide acute services, saving services that were previously going to be lost to areas outside the borough, such as A&E and maternity. I want to put on record my thanks to Daniel Elkeles and all the staff at Epsom and St Helier for helping to bring that about and for their amazing contribution to tackling the pandemic in an incredibly difficult year.

Despite the pandemic, Carshalton and Wallington has achieved a lot this year, but there is still a lot more work to do. We all hope for a better 2021. As well as supporting the community through the pandemic, I want to continue standing up for Carshalton and Wallington's interests here in this place, to support our thriving local economy, improve our transport links, protect our parks and clean up our air, provide a good or outstanding school place for every child, keep our area safe and deliver that £500 million investment into St Helier.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to finish by wishing you, Mr Speaker, all the House staff, my own team—Tommy, Lewis, Richard, Daisy and Catherine—and everyone in Carshalton and Wallington a very merry Christmas and a happy 2021.

3.4 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and of course all the Members and staff here a very happy Christmas? It has been, as other Members have said, a truly turbulent year. May I put on record my gratitude and enormous respect for the extraordinary frontline staff in our country, particularly our medical and care staff, whom history will remember as the pride of our generation?

The service of my constituency and the people who live in it has always been my priority during the 23 years for which I have had the privilege of representing Mitcham and Morden, but as we have all stayed at home and worked at home, even more of my focus has been local. When the nation searched for PPE, scrambled for tests and desperately secured university places, I am sure that all Members, like me, felt duty-bound to fight loudest for their constituents. I wake up every morning and remember just how lucky I am to have that responsibility.

However, I am afraid that there are some things that no Member should bear the burden of responsibility for, including ensuring that the children in their constituency have a meal and an education. This year, my local area has been forced to open an eighth food bank to account for the growing number of people who simply cannot afford to put food on the table. Every week at our Friday morning food bank, the queue grows longer, and more hard-working families tell me that they have lost their jobs, let down by the dither and delay that the Prime Minister has shown at every turn. We have stepped in where the Government have failed.

Meanwhile, when schools closed in March, the Government failed those children who could not continue learning from home without the tools required to log in. The lockdown exposed the digital divide across the UK, with approximately 9% of children—Ofcom estimates their number to be up to an extraordinary 1.78 million—without access to a laptop, desktop or tablet. While the Department for Education promoted its online Oak National Academy, let us be clear that no number of online lessons could benefit those children unable to log in from home.

My community rallied, securing hundreds of devices packed with data for children in some of the most vulnerable families. No child's education should be dependent on their internet access. Once again, we stepped in where the Government had failed. Many of those families are trapped in temporary accommodation, spending lockdown in cramped rooms with no outside space. On the Government's watch, the number of families in temporary accommodation has soared, with 127,240 children destined to wake up on Christmas morning without a permanent place to call home.

I recognise the challenge for any Government in a global crisis, but no matter where we sit in the Chamber, our reaction to yesterday's news that UNICEF will be feeding hungry children in the UK for the first time in its 70-year history must have been one of shock and shame—shock and shame for the Government, that is, not for UNICEF. I understand that the Leader of House said earlier today that UNICEF “should be ashamed”. He is a proud Catholic. I am too, but I am aware that my religion puts the need for self-awareness and responsibility at the top of its beliefs. If we are to be responsible, the Government should be aware of their failings in regard to vulnerable children and not try to blame the charities attempting to resolve some of those difficulties.

I do not just want to be negative; I also wish to be positive. It is not a silver bullet, but may I raise with the Minister an easy, tangible step forward and ask him to discuss it with his colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government? In September 2018, the then Prime Minister announced that a stamp duty surcharge of up to 3% would be imposed on overseas residential property investors and that all the money generated would be used to tackle homelessness. It was expected to raise £140 million. The percentage has changed three times since and is now set to be 2%, meaning that a £40 million loss is due to be implemented in April. Reverting to 3% on overseas properties would not resolve homelessness, but it would make another £40 million available, and help an awful lot of people. Food banks, the digital divide, and homelessness are three issues that arrive as a trio,

representing the hardship of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. The number of people this hardship impacts continues to soar.

I would like to finish by voicing the case of the millions of people and businesses who remain excluded from Government support through no fault of their own, many of whom, when they can no longer afford to pay their rent or mortgage, could face the difficulties I have described today: hard-working people in my constituency, such as Paul the photographer, Zohra the childminder, and Larry the florist, whom this Government continue to overlook. Initially, they were told that it was too complicated to include them in the support schemes, but almost a year on, I am afraid that excuse simply does not wash. The Government have failed enough people this year, but Minister, it is not too late to listen.

3.11 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), and I pay tribute to both her campaigning work and the insight she has given to the House this afternoon, which I found most moving and quite powerful.

I would like to address three issues this afternoon: the first is to reflect on 2020, which has been a very difficult year for all of us, as I am sure we would all agree. I want to spend some time paying tribute to all those who have served our community so well during this year. Secondly, I would also like to draw the House's attention to, and comment on, the current crisis with the spike in the infection rate due to the coronavirus. Thirdly, I would like to move on and look ahead to what I hope we can all agree will be a better and brighter year—we hope—in 2021, as a vaccine is rolled out.

I think it is fair to say that the past year has been an extremely difficult and challenging year, one that is genuinely unprecedented in modern British history and, indeed, world history. I pay tribute to a number of groups of people: first and foremost, I would obviously like to give my heartfelt thanks to our NHS and care workers, particularly those in my constituency of Reading East, such as those working at the Royal Berkshire Hospital, in GPs' surgeries and the community, or in care homes. Those people have worked incredibly hard; it is difficult to imagine what they have been through, and I am sure the whole House will agree that across the country, and indeed around the world, we owe our health and care workers an enormous debt of gratitude. It is difficult for us as lay people to fully express the level of our sincere and complete appreciation for the work they do.

I would also like to thank other groups of workers, bearing in mind in particular my shadow ministerial responsibilities as shadow Transport Minister. I have been deeply impressed by the work of our key workers during the crisis in this country, and I have previously put on record my support for, and recognition of the work of, those in the transport sector; I would like to do so again. It is particularly important to consider the contribution made by bus drivers and other workers in the transport sector who have put themselves at risk, and have continued to provide reliable, safe and appropriate services during a time of national crisis. I also understand—I believe we all understand—the enormous contributions made by other key workers, whether in retail or a wide range of aspects of public service, ranging from the

[Matt Rodda]

most straightforward to some that are perhaps behind the scenes. I would like to spend some time paying tribute to those workers, some of whom have spent an enormous amount of time and energy in the service of our community, and some of whom have paid quite heavily for that service.

I am sure the whole House would agree that a great service to our country is being provided by our public servants, but their efforts have been supplemented by volunteers.

I wish to say a brief word about some of the voluntary groups across my constituency. I am sure that others around the country have carried out the same vital functions. Indeed, other Members have mentioned some of them today, especially those groups running food banks and providing emergency help and relief to the most needy. We have an enormous number in Reading and, indeed, in suburban areas such as Woodley and Caversham, which are often thought of as relatively affluent. Enormous problems have been created by the pandemic, and the way that the community has rallied together has been quite simply outstanding and deeply impressive, and has been supported very valiantly by local authorities.

I wish to say a brief word about the work of Reading Borough Council, which I am very proud to be associated with—I should declare an interest as a former councillor. There has been impressive cross-party working in the authority, partnership with the voluntary sector through Reading Voluntary Action and, indeed, an impressive level of support across the town. Briefly, let me mention a couple of agencies, particularly ReadFood, the Trussell Trust and a number of other food banks and support organisations. I have mentioned others in previous speeches, so I will not overdo my slot by listing every single one by name, but I am deeply grateful for their work and I commend their work to colleagues.

It is also important to consider the way our whole community, and indeed the country, has responded during this crisis. It was quite moving that we reflected on VE Day during this crisis. In fact, at the very height and pinnacle of the crisis, we were celebrating the contribution of previous generations to this country. We need to recognise that the whole community has contributed quite substantially during this very difficult period. I am sure colleagues will all agree that the broad community, going beyond anybody with a special role, deserves to have some recognition for the work that has been done even by people in their day-to-day lives, socially distancing and putting up with the necessary but extensive range of restrictions, including the separation from friends and family and from loved ones. We are all missing our loved ones greatly, and it is important to bear that all in mind as we look back on 2020 and hope for a better future in 2021.

Let me move ahead. I wish to mention briefly the current crisis. I hope that I am still in time. I cannot see the clock because the camera is in the way. Obviously, we are all aware that many parts of the country, including my own county of Berkshire, have moved into different tiers in the past few hours. This is difficult; it is not easy. The important point is that we appreciate the actions that are being taken, but I urge the Government to look again at their advice for the Christmas period. It is much easier for people if they have clear and simple

rules, not complicated and over—elaborate ones. I hope that the Government will think again about that in the run-up to Christmas. We all want to see our loved ones, but we want to be safe. It is so important that we take stock at this difficult time, and that we continue our efforts while the vaccine is being rolled out. I am sure we all agree with that—this is not a party political point. The question is how we deliver it effectively in partnership with the community. I raise that with Ministers, and hope that they will think about Christmas.

I am grateful for the action that has been taken on the tiers, even though it is difficult. I also ask Ministers to look again at the broadbrush approach. I say to the Minister on the Front Bench that, as an Opposition Member, I am grateful for the way that the Government have offered economic support. We have all seen the need for Government action to be taken at this time of national crisis. Perhaps some people have reassessed their view of the economy as a result. However, the action that has been taken has been somewhat broadbrush.

I ask the Chancellor to look again at the way the money has been distributed within that overall financial envelope. It has been quite telling to see wealthy supermarkets, which have increased their sales during the crisis, actually handing money back, while people in small and medium-sized enterprises, the lifeblood of our economy, especially those in the new SMEs, who have set up small businesses and are trying very hard, are receiving no support whatsoever. I am thinking of 3 million people across the country. I have been contacted by many in my own constituency—I am sure that we all have. I urge the Government to look again at the spread of their spending and to think a bit more about how best to use that effectively, and I do hope that Ministers will take that point away.

Finally, I would like to wish everyone, particularly you, Madam Deputy Speaker, other colleagues, our staff and the country a very merry Christmas and a happy new year. I hope that we can look ahead to a brighter new year with a better future ahead.

3.19 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I fully endorse the remarks of the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda); I think we are all looking forward to 2021 being a whole lot better than the year we are leaving. I also associate myself with what he said in the tribute he has paid to his community; we have seen the best of our communities in response to this pandemic, and I wish to pay tribute to everyone in my constituency for stepping up to the challenge and bearing a difficult year with great fortitude. Let us all hope that next year is so much better.

In that vein, I wish to talk about how we come back out of this crisis, and to tell the House about the exciting plans we are making in Thurrock in our bid for a Thames estuary freeport, led by the ports of Tilbury and London Gateway. Members have often heard me claim that Thurrock is the port capital of the UK. Given that it is a centre of excellence for ports and logistics, there is no stronger case to be made than for a freeport to be located in Thurrock—[*Interruption.*] I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) will fully agree with that.

This is the natural evolution of the role of the Thames as an engine of wealth creation and prosperity. We sit here in this Parliament on the Thames. London is a

great capital city, one of the richest cities in the world, but it is located here only because of the Thames and because the Romans set up the port of Londinium. So it makes great sense, in the natural evolution of history—of exploiting our River Thames and our position as a maritime nation—to continue that evolution and establish the Thames estuary freeport in Thurrock.

People often think that the ships have left the Thames, but the fact of the matter is that all they did was move east. Tilbury had the first container port in the country, in 1968, just before I was born—seamless history there. We now have Britain's deepest sea port, which aims to be the biggest, at London Gateway; that has been the biggest inward investment in Europe, and opened within this past decade. I can also inform the House that we have Britain's newest port, in Tilbury², and that it took just one year between planning permission and the first ship arriving. If only all our public infrastructure projects were so efficient.

A little known fact is that the Thames remains Britain's second largest port river—second only in terms of tonnage landed to the Humber. We often hear people talk about Dover and other ports, but the port of London is still a significant one—it has just moved east to Thurrock. Having paid tribute to the entirety of my community and how they have responded to the challenge of covid, it has to be said that the ships that arrive in Tilbury and London Gateway are the ones that have kept us fed during this past year. The ships have continued to be unloaded and our dock workers have continued to go to work, and this is something we often take for granted.

People are looking forward to finally leaving the European Union, and although we have heard much prediction of chaos and difficulty, I can tell them that the ports in Thurrock are extremely well prepared. As I said, Tilbury² was built in the past year, specifically with the purpose of being Brexit-ready. I can tell the House that we already have ships relocating their routes from Dover to Tilbury to take advantage of what is a changed economic situation for how our ports will work.

I think Members will see the great pride I take in representing what is our maritime capital. This is an astonishingly competitive sector, one with which it is a pleasure to work. It is also a pleasure because the ports invest hugely in the local community and are massively committed to increasing skills and to making that big community contribution, so it is a great delight for me to continue to support them.

That takes us on to what our freeport bid would look like. As I said, we have the port of Tilbury, owned by Forth Ports, which is obviously Scottish—again, it is good for the Union that we have this partnership—and London Gateway, which is led by DP World. So this is a partnership born of two competitors, and it is a staggering feat for them to be taking this forward.

We have another great opportunity. As I mentioned, the Thames port has moved east, but there are jetties all the way into London, including one at Ford in Dagenham. We all recall that for many decades Dagenham was a vast site and a massive car manufacturer. In recent years, that manufacturing presence has declined, not least because our car habits have declined. When some of the car production was moved to more competitive locations in the world, the site moved to manufacturing just diesel engines. Of course, demand for that is now falling off.

Obviously, we want to keep Ford's presence here in the UK and want it to play a bigger part, particularly as we leave the European Union and look to new global relationships.

I am therefore very excited to tell the House that not only have the two ports of Tilbury and London Gateway come together to discuss that, but we are working with Ford to see how a partnership can be formed so that we can develop a new centre of excellence for electric and autonomous vehicles. That is the future. That is exactly the kind of post-Brexit opportunity we should take full advantage of.

I very much hope that the Government will give their full support to the Thames estuary freeport, not least because for decades, successive Governments tried to get the Thames estuary moving as an economic entity. That never quite worked because we in south Essex do not really like being told what to do by people from London. We like to control our own destiny, and that is exactly what we have done. The Thames estuary is an idea whose time has come. Our freeport will be the catalyst to make that happen, and I look forward to working with the Government to ensure that the Thames estuary freeport underlines Thurrock's position as the port capital of the UK.

3.26 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this Adjournment debate, which is different from all the others I normally try to participate in.

This has been one of the most difficult times in our living memories. There will be so many homes with empty chairs, so many loved ones who cannot meet because of restrictions, and so many who will have no heart to celebrate.

Looking back, I think of those precious to me who have been lost through coronavirus and cancer this year, those who have been taken in accidents and those who felt that they had no option other than to end their lives. It has been a difficult time for so many and it is easy to feel downhearted, but I have also seen a community pulling together, with people helping neighbours, and perhaps speaking to neighbours they had not spoken to before or had not spoken to for a long time. We have seen glimmers of a silver lining with family Zoom chats to keep connected, grandparents learning how to FaceTime—I am one of them, at long last, my wife says—and an upsurge in baking; my mother is a fantastic baker and cook and we have been sustained by her good foodstuffs over the last period. It reminds me of the promise that what the enemy means for evil, God brings good out of.

This Christmas will look very different for so many of us, but the message remains the same. It is a message of joy, of peace and, perhaps what we need the most, of hope. Things are bleak, but there is hope. I have that certainty of hope from my faith, but I also have hope as I see how some people have reacted during the pandemic. When I see the goodness of people to strangers, hear stories of fundraising for strangers in danger of losing their homes, see mystery gifts appearing on doorsteps, and learn that the food bank in my constituency has had more referrals than ever this year, but enough donations to meet those needs through the generosity of the people of Strangford, I have hope.

[Jim Shannon]

I am inspired by the normal, everyday person's reaction to events that have been out of their control, which is to make the best of it. As my mother would say—and she is definitely an Ulster Scot—“Get up and get on with it without gurning.” We do that, even though it might produce a wrinkle on our brow and some anxiety. I have seen so many people get on with it: our NHS workers in dangerous situations determined to come into work and make a difference; retired NHS staff stepping up and putting their shoulder to the plough once more—truly the angels in blue; businesses making adaptations to produce hand sanitiser, which they provided at cost to local companies. There are so many reasons to be glad that I am British. I am proud to be British when I see the overwhelming response by the British people. That should encourage us.

I love Christmas, and the dinner with the family. This is a different year for the family. Last year, we were 14; this year we will be five, and two children under two. That is what the rules tell us we must do, and we will obey the rules because I want to get out the other side of this, and I also believe that we have a responsibility to others. It is the time to read the gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus, knowing that this was the first step in the redemptive plan of love that offers hope to every one of us. Christmas will be different, but one thing that remains is love.

I urge the people of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to show love and bring hope this Christmas: the handwritten card that could mean the world coming through the post; the lovely potted Christmas plant left at a neighbour's door to bring cheer; the phone call made with no time pressures or restrictions; or the small thoughtful gift delivered with a smile and a wave. All of these are not the way we usually do it, but we can hold to the traditions of love and hope, and just try to be different this Christmas to encourage each other in what we do. I am hopeful that the light at the end of the coronavirus tunnel is getting slightly brighter, but there are still those who mourn, still those who are fervently praying for loved ones and still those who are hurting this year. So more than ever, the kind word and the kind gesture could be a lifeline, and in this year of all years, Christmas must be a community Christmas.

I take this opportunity to thank my constituents in Strangford for electing me. I have a privilege and an honour in being their MP. I serve everyone in that constituency, even though I am a member of the Democratic Unionist party. I love helping people, and I always have in my years as a councillor and in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and then when elevated to this place. I want to wish every right hon. and hon. Member in this House a safe and merry Christmas and a happy new year.

Jonathan Gullis: I just want to say to the hon. Gentleman, as a new colleague in this House, thank you for constantly reaching out and offering your support to all of us who are new to this place, across the House. What a tremendous gentleman you are.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is most kind. It is a privilege to make new friends in this House, and it is a privilege to have the opportunity to encourage each other. I believe that my job in this House is to encourage

each person. When I come to Adjournment debates, Members say, “Why do you always come?” Well, I actually come to support the person who is doing the Adjournment debate. I come to give them encouragement so that they can feel encouraged in what they do, and it is very important that we do that.

I want to convey to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I wish you, and the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker, a very merry Christmas and happy new year. You deserve it. You have put up with me for this whole year—well done! If there was a medal handed out for it, you would get the medal, along with everybody else.

I also want to say thanks to my staff, particularly Wendy, my manageress in the office; Naomi—a lady who is very much under pressure she writes the speeches for me, and as we all know, she is pretty busy—and Yvonne, Betty, Ashley, Christina and Billy. I thank all my staff for all they do.

I think perhaps I can have one more minute, Madam Deputy Speaker. [Laughter.] Sorry, but I want to finish with “A Christmas Prayer” by Robert Louis Stevenson. I studied Robert Louis Stevenson in literature class at school many years ago, and I have just found the Christmas prayer, so I will finish with this:

“Loving Father,
 help us remember the birth of Jesus,
 that we may share in the song of the angels,
 the gladness of the shepherds,
 and worship of the wise men.
 Close the door of hate
 and open the door of love all over the world.
 Let kindness come with every gift
 and good desires with every greeting.
 Deliver us from evil by the blessing
 which Christ brings,
 and teach us to be merry with clear hearts.
 May the Christmas morning
 make us happy to be thy children,
 and Christmas evening bring us to our beds
 with grateful thoughts,
 forgiving and forgiven,
 for Jesus' sake.
 Amen.”

3.34 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Before I start, may I wholeheartedly endorse the expression of appreciation for the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)? It has been my great pleasure to work with him on a number of issues, especially freedom of religion or belief. He is an inspiring leader on that issue, in particular in his role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group.

As my term of office serving as chair of the Conservative party human rights commission comes to an end shortly, I would like to pay tribute to all who over the past few years have contributed to our inquiries and reports, in particular the brave people who have given evidence to us, many at personal risk, and who either themselves or through their families have suffered greatly, often at the hands of their own Governments. I want to put on record my thanks and respect for them. Many are named in our reports. Without them, we as commissioners could not have highlighted the human rights concerns in those reports.

The commission's reports include a 2016 report on human rights in China, 2013 to 2016, entitled "The Darkest Moment"—sadly, now a misnomer. It was followed later that year by a report on forced organ harvesting in China. Less than a year later, there was a report on human rights in Russia today. In 2019, there was a report on China's Confucius Institutes, as well as a report entitled "The Limits of Consent on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery and their Impact on Prostitution in the UK". This year, we have held nine sessions to inform a further report, which we will shortly publish, on human rights in China from 2016 to 2020, entitled, sadly, "The Darkness Deepens".

Promoting and protecting freedom and human dignity should be at the heart of foreign policy. The Conservative party human rights commission was set up by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) to highlight international human rights concerns; inform, advise and enhance the party's foreign policy; and ensure that fundamental human rights are kept high on the political agenda. A number of Members of Parliament have been the chair of the Conservative party human rights commission since its creation, but the deputy chair throughout this 15-year period has been the same person, Benedict Rogers, to whom I pay particular tribute. I want to put on record my profound thanks and respect for him. He has not only carried the bulk of the commission's work throughout this entire period, organising witness sessions and producing the first draft of most of our reports, but has travelled to dozens—probably hundreds, I have lost count—of places across the world, often at great personal danger. He has been refused entry to one place and arrested and detained in others, meeting directly with those subject to human rights abuses to ensure that our reports are as reliable and authentic as they can be. I know that my respect for Ben is shared by very many parliamentarians in both Houses, and it has been a true privilege to work closely with him in this role.

Four years ago, the Conservative party human rights commission was a canary in the coalmine in Westminster, calling attention to China's human rights crisis almost as a lone voice—in fact, an urgent question I raised in 2015 prompted a furore from some parts of Government—although, of course, many other courageous voices, such as Bob Fu of ChinaAid, have been raising such concerns for years well beyond Westminster. Today, it is heartening that the Conservative party human rights commissioners are but one of many such voices here in the UK Parliament, as yesterday's urgent question on the Uyghurs demonstrated—including voices from within the current Government. We welcome that.

As mentioned, we will shortly be launching a further report expressing concerns about the deepening deterioration of human rights in China, which we hope will serve to continue to highlight these issues and inform further debate—a debate it is critical we have if we are to better understand how, as parliamentarians, we can help to shape a new international order in which the value of human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, democracy, international treaty promises, and freedom of expression, association and religion or belief are better promoted and defended. It is heartening to me that, over my 10 years in this House, expressions of concern from parliamentary colleagues on these

issues have noticeably increased, and with impact and effect, not least, as we have seen recently, with regard to Hong Kong.

Sadly, any such impact cannot yet be said to have happened with regard to the deteriorating human rights situation in China. Among the most dramatic evidence of the decline in human rights there since our commission's last inquiry in 2016 are the violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief. These have become even more egregious, widespread and systematic, according to evidence received by the Conservative party human rights commission this year. As we now know, some of the most egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief affect the Uyghurs, and they encompass an almost total denial of every basic human right. They include their own Government's attacks on the Uighur identity, culture and religion, the breaking up of families, the destruction of thousands of mosques and the recent heart-rending sight of people being loaded on to trains to be transported to prison camps with purpose-built factories alongside them. This was all too reminiscent of the holocaust.

However, it is by no means only the Uyghurs who are being persecuted. For every major religious community in China today—Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, Muslims, Buddhists, practitioners of Falun Gong and others—the situation has become more restricted. Believers across the faiths have been arrested, imprisoned, tortured and even killed in connection with their religion or belief. There are other Muslim groups as well as the Uyghurs in Xinjiang that are affected, as well as the Buddhists in Tibet. Violations against Christians have intensified with the imprisonment of pastors and the desecration or destruction of hundreds of churches.

Accounts to the independent China tribunal, chaired by Sir Geoffrey Nice, QC, which delivered its final judgment in March this year on the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners, were truly heart-searing. We are told that persecution by way of forced organ removal is taking place on an industrial scale. It is almost too horrible for the human mind to comprehend. Human beings are being cut open while still alive, without anaesthetic, for their kidneys, livers, hearts, lungs, corneas and skin to be removed and turned into commodities for sale.

We, as commissioners on the Conservative party human rights commission, have found that human rights concerns do not always come neatly packaged and presented. Engaging can be messy, awkward and risky, and speaking truth to power is not comfortable, often as much for the hearer as for the speaker. So, why should we raise these concerns? It is because, whether we agree with their beliefs or not, these are fellow human beings who are being affected. It is because we should respect the worth of every human being, and because every created individual has value. It is because once we have heard of these things, we should not stay silent. As the holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said:

"Whoever listens to a witness, becomes a witness".

We speak simply because we should, and because, however distant the sufferings of those who hurt might be, we share in their common humanity. In this House we have been granted the profound privilege of having voices that can resonate across the world, and we must use them to speak out on behalf of the most vulnerable, afflicted and oppressed.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): 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:

Taxation (Post-transition Period) Act 2020
 United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020
 Trade (Disclosure of Information) Act 2020.

Christmas Adjournment

Debate resumed.

3.43 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow such a moving speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). This has been an absolutely rotten year—the worst that I can ever remember—and I think every one of us will be glad to see the back of it, but before we adjourn for the Christmas recess, there are a number of points I wish to make.

Many of my constituents were absolutely fed up with C2C's reorganisation of the timetable, resulting in people being crammed together. This was not good enough, but I hope to see further improvements under the new chief executive, Ben Ackroyd.

Southend airport is wonderful, and regional airports need more support, but my constituents are getting fed up with being woken in the wee hours of the morning by Amazon flights. It really is not acceptable to be woken up in the wee hours of the morning in that way. I was very disappointed to learn that Arriva UK Bus has withdrawn the new eco-friendly service in Southend and replaced it with old polluting buses. That is ridiculous and needs to be changed.

Southend United have been having a tough old time. We were, I think, bottom by about nine points, but I am delighted to tell the House that we have just beaten Scunthorpe and we are now only bottom by one. So things are improving, and perhaps we can celebrate with a new stadium.

Like all other hon. Members, I wish to congratulate health workers in my constituency. I congratulate Southend clinical commissioning group, the staff at Southend University Hospital and the director of public health at Southend-on-Sea Borough Council for all their hard work in co-ordinating the local response to covid-19. Both the hospital and our local ambulance service have been absolutely wonderful, and, as all hon. Members should say, my goodness, they deserve a wonderful Christmas. I was very disappointed when Nazareth House closed, but I am delighted to say that it is now being used as a coronavirus testing centre, so the ethos of caring remains there.

With the Belvedere on Leigh Cliffs, too much money has been wasted on a project that is a magnet for drug abuse and antisocial behaviour. That is just getting worse, but I praise the wonderful work of Leigh-on-Sea Town Council, under the chairmanship of Councillor Paul Gilson, who has been working with local community groups such as Friends of Love Leigh Cliffs and Essex police to tackle antisocial behaviour in Leigh and along the cliffs.

On roads and parking, we really need to do something about the quality of the roads in Southend, and the local council should work even harder to reduce speeding. I applaud the fact that they are providing free parking in the town centre over Christmas, but we need better signage.

I am delighted that my constituent Lakhbir Sandhu, who was imprisoned in Czechoslovakia for many months, is now free and celebrating his freedom with constituents, thanks to the wonderful work of the British ambassador and a wonderful legal team.

We have a marvellous hospice in Southend, Fair Havens, which is really under pressure at the moment. I congratulate all the staff there. I always associate the wonderful Salvation Army with Christmas, although it works 365 days a year, and I look forward to the progress of its Project Malachi, creating temporary accommodation for people experiencing homelessness.

It was crazy to close our churches earlier in the year, frankly. They were so careful about social distancing and all that. That must never happen again—people who want to go to church should be allowed to do so.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis, I was pleased that we launched our report in October. It has made a big difference for people. My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) is vice-chairman of the group, and we want to ensure that the voices of the 1.5 million ladies who suffer from this illness are heard.

Unfortunately, one of my constituents lost her granddaughter, Maisie Tothill—this is terrible to cope with—to sudden unexpected death as a result of epilepsy. The Tothills have started a charity in her name, the Maisie Tothill Foundation. SUDEP Action recently published its report on sudden unexpected death in epilepsy, and I hope that the Government will act on its recommendations.

Southend's HARP does a wonderful job in reducing rough sleeping in Southend. Some 80% of those who were temporarily housed in bed and breakfasts have now found long-term accommodation. They really are pulling their lives around. I also praise Prost8, a wonderful local charity, and particularly its founder Paul Sayer. Last Friday, I welcomed—socially distanced, of course, Madam Deputy Speaker—a number of charities, including the citizens advice bureau. They have had a very difficult year, but they have absolutely stepped up to the mark.

Our police locally are wonderful, and I am delighted to say that Southend has seen a 10.3% reduction in crime year on year and a 12.8% reduction in victim-based crime. Essex County Fire and Rescue Service has done a wonderful job in inspecting all the high-rise buildings with cladding over the past few months, and I am glad to hear that low-rise blocks are also going to be inspected and remedial work recommended where necessary.

Unfortunately, for obvious reasons, we could not physically hold our annual centenarians' tea party. We did it virtually, and that was a wonderful experience, but I hope we will be able to reinstate it next year, and we are going to do our best to once again get into "Guinness World Records".

Now, on city status—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] There should be a city-status competition for the Queen's jubilee in 2022, so that Southend can become a city. She is probably sick to death of seeing statues of herself, but I think there should be yet another statue of the Queen in the vicinity of Buckingham Palace and the Palace of Westminster, to celebrate the fact that not only is it her platinum jubilee but she is the longest-serving Head of State in the world.

I have had a number of ambassadorial meetings by Zoom this year, and I praise the work of the ambassadors to the Philippines and the Maldives, which is in a far better position now.

I pay tribute to the wonderful work of Steve Tinning with the charity Safe Passage. I am grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), for arranging a meeting.

I am delighted that the Government have at long last announced a ban on live animal exports in England and Wales. The next thing on the list will be to stop the farrowing of sows in crates, which is very cruel. Thankfully, zoos can currently remain open in certain tiers.

Remembrance Day and VJ Day were very muted this year. Perhaps rather ambitiously, I organised a live VJ Day broadcast—I am not sure that I will ever do that again; it is much better to record it. We celebrated both events and I hope we will be able to do much more next year. Peter Egan narrated the history of the conflict in the far east and it was absolutely wonderful.

Chase High School is a wonderful school in my constituency, and I was delighted to be there to see the opening of the Geoff Nash building.

I have one constituent who has been on and on at me about the relationship between coronavirus deaths and medicines such as steroids, which, according to this constituent, can lower the immune system and make infections more likely. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to make sure that we get a reply from the Department of Health and Social Care on that.

The high street, and particularly independent shops, have had an incredibly difficult time. I welcomed the opening of a new shop called Balloonacy. We should all try to shop locally.

This year we lost a wonderful woman and a national treasure: Dame Vera Lynn. I am in constant contact with her daughter Ginny, and there are all sorts of people behind this project. I know that statues are controversial, but we must get a statue of Dame Vera Lynn. There are very few statues of women and it has to be in the best place possible so that future generations can enjoy and appreciate the wonderful work that she did.

I offer you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the team under the Speaker and everyone who works here a very happy Christmas and a far better 2021.

3.52 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for being slightly late. To my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), I say that it is always great to hear his speeches and the tours of his constituency and, like many other Members, I hope that Southend is granted city status at some point.

It has been a very difficult year for many in North West Durham; however, they have also had a different year with a very different new MP. I have fully taken on some of the major challenges that have faced my constituency over the past few months. I am delighted that Shotley Bridge Hospital is one of the 48 hospitals that are going to get Government support, so we will be seeing a new community hospital. There is also extra money for a feasibility study for a "Consett to the Tyne" public transport link. Those two major local projects will really help to level up and transform my community, and hopefully help us to build back better beyond covid.

[Mr Richard Holden]

On a local level, I have been concentrating on the motor homes tax, and I managed to work with the Chancellor to get it reduced earlier this year, thereby saving £5,000 on the cost of a new motor home. Many of those are built in my North West Durham constituency—

Jonathan Gullis: You are an expensive MP.

Mr Holden: Indeed I am—and I make no apology for it.

The legislation on rates relief for public lavatories is currently going through the House of Lords, and I hope to see its journey continue. I am honoured to work with colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group on local democracy to see the relief finally secured. It will have a particularly beneficial impact for parish and town councils throughout the country, saving them £8 million a year.

Access to cash is something that I have been working on as a member of the Public Accounts Committee. In my constituency we have managed to save the cash machine at the post office in Billy Row, enabling that community to—probably—keep its local shop, and in Moorside there has been a move from a machine that charges £1.99 a go to one that is free, helping to put £20,000 a year back into the pockets of people in one of the most deprived wards in the constituency.

As far as casework goes, several things have really mattered a lot to me this year. One of them has been working with the excellent Baroness Stedman-Scott in the other place. She has really helped out a couple of my constituents, particularly with personal independence payment assessments and reassessments. They have been going on for such a long time, and we have seen really good progress there, with some constituents seeing big payments that were backdated for several years. We are really helping them out.

As far as private Member's Bills go, last week I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to ban virginity testing and I will do everything I possibly can to get the Government to give it a bit of space at some point, or perhaps to attach it to another Bill. I have been delighted to help out my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) with her private Member's Bill on testing for psychoactive substances in prisons. That is a really important measure that has, I know, been welcomed by many prison officers who work in Frankland and other prisons near my constituency, because of the effect those substances have on the inmates.

Next year, I hope that we will see more sunlit uplands than this year has provided. I know that many of my local pubs and hospitality businesses have really suffered during the lockdown, and they want the restrictions ended as soon as possible. I know that that can happen only with the vaccine programme roll-out, and I have been delighted to see the Government put their shoulder to the wheel on that, getting preferential access to a huge number of vaccines. I hope that the Oxford vaccine can be rolled out as quickly as possible once it is safe to do so: that will make a massive difference because of the ease of distributing it in care settings across the country.

I want to mention a few things that I will be looking forward to next year. Nationally, I hope to make a bit of a push on mental health, particularly for young people. After the year we have had, the impact of that and of not being able to see friends, family and relatives has been a concern for many people locally.

Willington, Tow Law and Crook really need some good news on the towns and high street funds side of things. Crook has had more than a decade of being ignored and having services removed—it saw its local swimming pool removed almost 10 years ago—and it is important that it sees some proper local investment. The post office in Wolsingham has been earmarked for potential closure, and I am going to work with local people to see whether we can find somebody to take that on.

The Christmas lights in Consett this year were an absolute disgrace. The council seemed to manage to put out cones as quickly as it could all over the town centre when it came to easing the lockdown, yet when it came to putting up a few fairy lights to brighten the town centre ahead of Christmas, it seems to have totally failed. I hope that the council will work with me next year to make Consett, Crook and Willington town centres look a bit brighter. I am delighted to be going to Wolsingham tomorrow to switch on the Christmas lights.

On the particular issue of covid-19 and hospitality, next year I would like the Government to reflect on what a hard year this has been for the hospitality sector, particularly our local pubs and brewers. I will certainly join colleagues on all sides to put pressure on for a reduction in beer duty and a change to the taper system to allow small breweries to expand without a massive tax hit.

Finally, I want to mention two things that have affected lots of different parts of my constituency in lots of different ways. The first is planning. There has been a huge amount of talk about it here, but we need to see our towns and communities enabled by large unitary authorities such as mine to come forward with proper neighbourhood plans that give them a proper voice. In particular, I am thinking of High West Road in Crook and the Medomsley Bank development. There is also concern about the possibility of a waste-to-energy incinerator in Consett. Secondly, speeding is a huge problem in so many of my towns and villages. It would be really nice to have the council work with me on getting some buffer zones, particularly for our rural villages and small towns, to make those communities safer for everybody.

4 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), who has had such an impressive first year in this place and, clearly, from the tour de force that he has just given us, in his constituency.

It is a year ago to the day that we first assembled in this place as new Members. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said, it has been a pretty rotten year, but I would like to thank everybody in the House for all they have done to enable the House to continue in the way that it has. That includes you, Madam Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker and all your teams, the Clerks, the Doorkeepers, the catering teams and, particularly, the audiovisual team, who have

had to make so many efforts this year to enable us to continue. It would be remiss of me not to pay particular tribute to the staff of the Science and Technology Committee, on which I sit, who have done so much work at very short notice on the coronavirus pandemic this year.

It has been a very difficult year in Newcastle-under-Lyme. This morning, we learned that we remain in tier 3. We have made huge strides in Newcastle. Our rate was 470 a month ago, and it is down to 200 now. It is still too high, but I pay tribute to everyone for their hard work on that, particularly the staff at Royal Stoke University Hospital, who are under so much pressure. I hope that we will be able to get to tier 2 in the new year. I pay tribute to the Government for all they have done to support people economically during the pandemic, but I gently ask the Deputy Chief Whip to get a message to the Chancellor that we want to see even more help to get our high street and our hospitality industry back on their feet.

I would like to take this opportunity to speak about a matter of great importance to many of my constituents: Walley's Quarry landfill in Silverdale in my constituency. It is a former clay extraction quarry that was converted to landfill use. It is not located in the countryside; it is in a built-up area. There are residential properties within around 100 metres of the site boundary in multiple directions. Lots of residents in the local area report being plagued by the pungent odour, even inside their homes. It is comfortably the biggest issue that I receive correspondence about in my mailbox day in, day out, particularly when the weather conditions are just right—or, as the residents would see it, just wrong. It was the most talked about local issue on the doorstep during the election campaign.

This landfill should never have been permitted. The Environment Agency, in the discussions I have had with it, has acknowledged that it is in a particularly unusual location. The local borough and county council objected to the original application in 1997, but they were overruled by the then Secretary of State, John Prescott, who is now in the other place. Perhaps this is symptomatic of how the red wall used to be taken for granted. With the constituency having a Labour majority of 17,000, perhaps he concluded that there was not much political danger in approving this manifestly inappropriate use of the quarry. Well, Labour does not have a majority of 17,000 any more.

The lockdowns in recent months have only thrown the issue into sharper relief. People working from home or confined to their houses because they have been shielding have been surrounded by bad smells, unable to enjoy their gardens during the hot weather in the summer or open their windows when they need to sleep at night. I raised this matter in Westminster Hall in February, and residents wrote to me about being unable to hang their washing outside for fear of the smell and feeling sick, gagging or more as a result of the odour. Newcastle cemetery is directly opposite the landfill, and, as Members can imagine, this issue has ruined many funerals. Many people who come to visit their dearly departed loved ones find that the odour in the vicinity detracts from what should be a special moment.

I have tabled a number of written parliamentary questions about this to get more data and more information from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs. I got a response today from the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), whom I thank for her engagement. It says:

“Although no landfill will ever be completely odour free, the level and type of odour arising from such operations should not be causing annoyance.”

Well, from the figures I have been given, it is clearly causing annoyance. In October, the Environment Agency received 992 reports of odour in the whole country, 225 of which—23%—were about Walley's Quarry in my constituency. In September, the figure was 371, or 17%. That is clearly indicative of the annoyance that it is causing.

The smell has been much worse in recent weeks; I think it is to do with the atmospheric conditions, although it may be to do with the operations themselves. I have encountered the smell myself on a number of occasions. I have smelt it when coming out of my office on the high street of Newcastle, which is more than 2 miles away. It is obviously not good for the high street to have that odour, and it is clearly affecting the quality of life of a great many of my constituents. It is serious. It is unacceptable that we are asking people to put up with—it. I am also struck by the fact that the guidance about Christmas bubbles says that people should have a well ventilated Christmas. Well, it is pretty much impossible for people in Silverdale, Knutton or Poolfields to have a well-ventilated Christmas. Turkey and sprouts can cause bad smells, but not on the level of this landfill.

Earlier this week, residents were holding yet another protest outside the gates of the landfill site. That demonstrates the helplessness that people feel and the failure, in their view, of the Environment Agency to respond appropriately. It has shaken public confidence in our agencies and our government. Residents want action to be taken and they feel that they are being fobbed off.

I will mention a couple of aspects of the law in the time I have available. There is a 0 to 6 scale for measuring odour, which is entirely subjective. People are asked to ring in and say how bad it is—“Is it a 2, a 3, or a 4?” This is exactly the same scale that the Environment Agency then uses when it sends people out into the area on odour tours to say how bad it is. Understandably, this does not engender public confidence. We need to do more scientific monitoring. Scientific monitoring exercises have been done, but we need to be monitoring hydrogen sulphide, which causes most of the problem, and the methane as well. It has got to the point where residents are purchasing their own monitoring equipment, which I find absolutely ridiculous. The Environment Agency needs to get into the 21st century and start using proper monitoring tools rather than a subjective scale, which undoubtedly causes a great deal of—

Jonathan Gullis: Scrap the 0 to 6.

Aaron Bell: Yes, scrap the 0 to 6, as my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour says.

Looking back, at the end of my first year as the Member of Parliament for Newcastle-under-Lyme, it is my greatest frustration that there has been so little progress on this issue, though I accept that everybody has been entirely preoccupied with coronavirus. The Environment Agency, which I have met in recent months, is aware of the problem and how it affects my constituents,

[Aaron Bell]

because it receives these complaints, but it seems to be either hidebound by the law or unable, or unwilling, to tackle the problem seriously. I understand the operator's position—it is a commercial operator—but I do not think that it is willing to admit the scale of the problem. It does not, I think, engage properly with complaints, and it has attacked me personally for raising the complaints of my constituents. Perhaps understandably, it repeats that it is operating a compliant site, and that is undoubtedly the case where it is at the moment.

In conclusion, all that my constituents want—particularly the ones in that area—for Christmas is a solution to this. They want a solution to the smell that is plaguing their lives. I do not think it is acceptable that we ask people to live like this. Whether we need to change the law or get fresh monitoring, which I have called for from the Environment Agency, we need to get some progress on this in 2021, because it is unacceptable and it has been going on for far too long.

4.7 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): Before I talk about the many things I want to talk about today, I will mention two other things quickly. First, I pass up no opportunity to mention the need to reopen Grove station in my constituency, which my constituents have wanted for over 40 years. Thousands more houses have gone into that area, with very congested roads. I have told my constituents that I will keep going and going until we are successful with this.

Secondly, I want to mention a man called Dave Wells. He got to the final of “MasterChef” this week. He is a Didcot resident, and the whole of Didcot is hugely proud of him for getting that far. He did not win, unfortunately, but, as we know, “MasterChef” is a big deal. Over 5 million people watched the final, which I think, Mr Deputy Speaker, is just shy of the number that will be watching us right now on the Parliament channel. It is a hugely proud moment for the people of Didcot, and I have been exchanging messages with him to try to get his new restaurant into the constituency somewhere. I am agnostic about where, whether it is Didcot, Wallingford, Faringdon, Wantage or any of the villages I represent, but let us get it somewhere, because I think that would be another welcome attraction to my constituency.

The first main thing I want to talk about is Royal Mail. Our postmen and women have worked incredibly hard, including throughout the lockdown period, but a few weeks ago, I started to get a regular stream of emails every day from constituents whose mail was not being delivered. This was regular mail, such as letters, magazines and birthday cards. There was one couple whose 65th wedding anniversary cards had not arrived. It seems to me that if they can make 65 years of marriage, they deserve to have their cards arrive on time. Even more seriously, hospital appointments were being missed because this mail was not arriving.

It is clear that postmen and women have worked really hard, but I called a meeting with Royal Mail last week. Something is clearly not going right with the service at the moment. It is a busy time, there have been staff shortages and there are additional constraints because of covid and the need to restrict the number of people in Royal Mail buildings. I was interested to hear from

Royal Mail that it characterises what has happened as its having gone from a letter service delivering parcels to a parcel service delivering letters. Apparently, had I been able to visit the mail rooms this year, as I know Members of this House do every year, I would have seen everything being delivered by Royal Mail, including very large TVs, but also, as I understand my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) saw on her visit, washing machines. Clearly something is going on with the way Royal Mail is operating that means people are not getting their regular post. It is very distressing to them. Constituents of mine are still reporting a problem, and we need to get to the bottom of what that is, because in the new year the price of first-class stamps will go up by 12%, and I do not think there will be a 12% increase in the quality of service that our constituents receive.

The second main thing I want to talk about is health services in my constituency, which have two aspects to it. The first is Wantage Community Hospital, which was closed in 2016 because legionella bacteria were found. My constituents expected that closure to be temporary, but, as the House might guess, the hospital has still not reopened. That is a cause of distress to constituents, who very much loved the local community hospital. They are fearful that perhaps it will never reopen, or that perhaps the site will be sold off.

I have regular conversations with local health leaders about the hospital, and I do not believe they have any intention to see it permanently closed or, indeed, to try and sell it off. They make the case that probably what the hospital needs is to offer different services from what it was offering before it closed. That is a case for them to make, and the decision making has been delayed again because of covid, but my constituents do deserve resolution as soon as possible.

The second key aspect of health services that I want to talk about is health services in the inner Didcot area. We have three patient participation groups in Didcot, and their chairs do a great job. They have calculated that in terms of the pressure on patient numbers, the population of Didcot has increased by 38% in five years, yet we have no new surgeries. That raises one of the regular problems of house building.

My constituency has had thousands and thousands of new houses. As I have said before in this place, most people are not opposed to house building. Although they may not like house building directly outside their windows, most people are not opposed to it; they just want to know that housing is of high quality, does the right things by the environment, is genuinely affordable and, importantly, is matched by the infrastructure that the growing population needs, because thousands more houses are due to go into this area. We had a big development at Great Western Park, which again had no new GP surgery coming with it, despite the best efforts of the three PPG chairs and people such as Councillor Ian Snowdon. The current GP surgeries are bursting at the seams, and we need some form of new health hub in Didcot that relieves the pressure on GP appointments, but also provides a wider range of health services, given that the population of this area will continue to grow.

The final thing I want to talk about, as a number of Members have, is what a year it has been. It has been an awful year for everybody, and it has been worse for

those who have lost a job, lost a business or, even worse, lost a loved one. I think there are few things we can say to offer real condolences to those people, although I offer them here today.

I know that, as we go into 2021, we will still be fighting this virus; more people will lose their jobs, their businesses, and indeed their lives; we will all be facing awful economic circumstances. Yet we got through this year—the country got through it. We saw tremendous effort, energy and achievements by our public services, not least in health and education, and by our private services—politicians generally default to public services, but let us not forget all that the private services, such as the shops that remained open and kept serving us, and the great innovation by many of our businesses. There was also a tremendous community response: people stepped up to serve their neighbours in whatever way they could. I saw that from Wallingford to Shrivensham in my constituency, and I know that every Member of the House saw it in their own constituency.

I am hugely proud of Britain and what it has achieved this year, and hugely proud of the British people and everything they have done, despite what an awful year it has been and despite all that they are going to be facing. With the vaccine and the other positive developments, I think we can look forward to a better 2021. I wish every Member of this House, everyone who works here and everyone who works anywhere else a happy Christmas and a very good new year.

4.16 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) on his superb speech, and adding my cheers of “Merry Christmas!” to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, all Members across the House, and, most important, all the staff who work across the parliamentary estate. They go above and beyond, and I am grateful for all the support they have given me in my first year as a Member of Parliament.

I send a big “Merry Christmas!” to the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. When Circuit’s “Messages of Joy” campaign conducted research to determine the kindest city in the UK—shock, horror!—Stoke came out on top. But it was no shock or surprise for me or the people of that fine city. We are a resolute, spirited and doughty group of individuals who believe that community must come first. I praise our health and care heroes at Royal Stoke University Hospital, Haywood Walk-in Centre and across our local NHS, and thank them for the sacrifices they have made every day to keep us safe. My family and I will forever be indebted to them, particularly because in the midst of the crisis the maternity team at the Royal Stoke helped to deliver Amelia, Nkita’s and my first child. We are delighted to be celebrating our daughter’s first Christmas this year.

I want to say a big thank you to Staffordshire police, Staffordshire fire and rescue, teachers and support staff, supermarket workers, Royal Mail staff, bus drivers and the many other key workers who have worked in the most challenging conditions. Across Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke, they have risen to the challenge. I also want to give a big shout-out to the amazing voluntary sector—Men Unite, the Pop Up Pantry at St Michael’s in Chell, VAST, the Salvation Army in

Kidsgrove, Tunstall and Smallthorne, Swan Bank Methodist church, Number 11 and Team Chatterley, to name but a few.

There are two individuals who I think deserve a special shout-out. One is Carol Shanahan, co-owner of Port Vale football club and founder of the Hubb Foundation. Throughout the crisis, she and her organisation have served 250,000 meals to over 30,000 families across the city of Stoke-on-Trent. That is to be commended. What I have enjoyed the most about Carol’s work with the Hubb is that the foundation is now providing slow cookers, with ingredients for one meal a day for 12 weeks and a series of recipe cards, with the aim of ensuring that families can benefit independently when the support ends. Stoke-on-Trent City Council has invested £23,000 in the scheme, which is extremely welcome.

I also want to give a big shout-out to an absolute community champion. The history books may not have his name, but I hope he will be able to look to this place to see it written down. Rich Stephenson-Evans works at Kidsgrove Tesco, and he is the community champion. He has been in that role for many years—since well before I arrived on the scene in Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke. He is one of the true unsung heroes in our community. If ever a man—or person, sorry; I should say that in this day and age—deserved an honour from Her Majesty, it is Rich Stephenson-Evans. He has gone above and beyond delivering food from Tesco. It is amazing that there is anything to buy in the Tesco in Kidsgrove, because he normally swipes the shelves clean. He has delivered across the area, to all those charities I named, but he has also helped those charities get £500 or £1,000 grants from Tesco. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage said, we must always acknowledge that the private sector has played a huge part in helping us to tackle covid and rightly deserves as much praise as our public sector.

I would like to give a special shout-out to Lainey Evans, who is in year 5 at St Wilfrid’s Catholic Academy and was the winner of my Christmas card competition. It is a superb design with a bottle kiln and the Angel of Burslem above it, which I think is wonderful. The runners-up were Isla in year 4, William in nursery and Adam in year 4. A big thank you to them for taking part. With over 500 entries, it was superb to see.

I want to put on the record my plea to the Minister on behalf of the superb Titanic Brewery, which is in dire need of additional Government support. Once pubs are closed, brewers have no way of selling, apart from the odd bottle that they can sell from their factory shop. That does not make up for the money that is being lost in what would otherwise be a boom season with Christmas, so that additional support is needed.

Ceramic manufacturers also need support. They are part of the supply chain into the hospitality sector, and they have seen a big difference between their 2019 and 2020 orders. They are asking for the VAT reduction to be extended to them, at the manufacturing end, and they are also asking for business rates relief. While that will not save every job, it will make a huge difference to making sure that these giants—Churchill China, Steelite and Burleigh Pottery—go on to exist evermore in my local community.

On transportation, north Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent already have very good strategic transport links. We have the M6, A500 and A50 serving the city, and the

[Jonathan Gullis]

rail journey to London is a little over one hour and 30 minutes, but now we have our £29 million from the transforming cities fund, which is absolutely superb. It will have a huge impact on Stoke-on-Trent station, but it will also bring investment in our bus services.

I presented a petition in the House the other day, having missed my previous slot—Mr Deputy Speaker was kind enough not to embarrass me in public—on the Stoke-Leek line. Over 1,000 residents have signed that petition, and I am working with my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) and my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) to deliver this important piece of rail infrastructure, which will bring connectivity and help our economy. Most important it will potentially serve the town of Milton, which is a superb little town with great local independent retailers, and support some local schools. It will therefore potentially take traffic off our roads, which is a huge issue.

Longport station also deserves a shout-out. Sadly, the Department for Transport rejected its element of the transforming cities fund because footfall was not high enough in the original criteria. I have accepted and understood that, but I am now going to set up a Longport station promotion group with key local stakeholders interested in driving greater use of Longport station. Now Stoke station has that key interchange, thanks to the £29 million from the transforming cities fund, feeder stations such as Longport will be increasingly important in Stoke-on-Trent's public transport revolution. I am also convinced that Longport can and should be a better-appreciated rail destination in its own right, because we have Middleport pottery just up the road, Westport Lake Park and the mother town of Burslem—all superb places to visit.

It would be remiss of me not to mention Silicon Stoke and Chatterley Whitfield very briefly. We now have the Silicon Stoke board at Stoke-on-Trent City Council; Councillor Abi Brown has teamed up with me. We have NHS Digital joining that board, and many other local and national stakeholders. We reckon that the 104 km of full fibre that has been installed in the ground across the city will potentially unlock £625 million in the local economy. I want to set up a game school—a regional free school for 14 to 18-year-olds with part-selective entry, based on talent and commitment to developing specialist skills in differing elements of game design, creation, production and marketing.

Finally, the sleeping giant that is Chatterley Whitfield is the largest complete quarry site in the whole of Europe. It is time for an industrial heritage park. The people at Historic England have listened to me badger them time and again. The consultants at Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios are now leading a 10-year vision plan. We have had our first meeting with key stakeholders. I got £22,500 out of Historic England as well, with the Friends of Chatterley Whitfield and Stoke-on-Trent City Council. It is time to make sure that these great sleeping giants are appreciated as part of our industrial heritage.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): To resume his seat no later than 4.32 pm, Mr Tom Hunt.

4.24 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; I do not plan to go on that long, but who knows? Me and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) have a very good relationship, but we often vie for the same limelight on similar issues.

It has been a remarkable year: going into 2020, I do not think any of us could have predicted the challenges that were ahead. A huge number of my constituents have lost loved ones whom they will never see again, and the virus continues to be a threat. A vast majority of my constituents continue to work hard to prevent the spread of the virus. The livelihoods of many of my constituents have been lost, and they continue to be incredibly anxious about what the future holds for them. There is not a single person in the country whose mental health has not been impacted, at least to some extent, by this, and I imagine all of us are in the same boat to some extent on that issue.

I was elected, along with my colleagues, last year. One of the key reasons we were elected was to get Brexit done—to resolve the issue and move on—and I think the vast majority of people who voted for us last year to get Brexit done did so believing that they were electing a Prime Minister who would stand up for British interests, who would be resolute in doing so, and who would not capitulate and accept a deal that would encumber us and tie our hands when it came to fully exploiting the benefits of Brexit. I think the Prime Minister is living up to that, and I welcome it. The Labour party talks about what was in the minds of voters when they voted for the Prime Minister; frankly, I find it quite extraordinary that all of a sudden, the Labour party has such a profound understanding of the motivations of voters, many of whom voted leave. For me, they voted to elect a Government that would deliver a proper Brexit, not a Brexit in name only, and that is exactly what this Government are doing.

With regard to covid-19, I was pleased to hear today that Ipswich would be remaining in tier 2. It was quite peculiar, because going into the second national lockdown, we had very low rates of covid. We were a long way below the national average, and we were one of 18 local authority areas that left the second national lockdown with rates increasing. That has continued in tier 2, but despite my concerns about the prevalence of the virus, particularly in those over the age of 65, I do think that keeping us in tier 2 was the right decision. I am glad that that decision has been made, and I am confident that the people of Ipswich will continue to work hard to make sure we can get to a better place with fewer restrictions at the first opportunity.

It is difficult to know where to stop thanking so many of my constituents, who have worked so hard. A huge number work at Ipswich Hospital as nurses and doctors. They have risked their lives, and have literally gone above and beyond to save the lives of many of my constituents. I also thank the teachers who have gone to extraordinary lengths to continue providing education in incredibly challenging circumstances, and the police officers who never thought they were going into the police force to start managing the distance between people, but have done so with dignity and in a professional way, and have got the balance just right. Turning to the charitable sector, we have never needed our charities

more than we do right now, yet at the same time the strain on their finances has never been so great. There is no better example of that than when I temporarily became a skinhead after shaving my hair off to support Age UK Suffolk, and then very sadly we found out, having raised around £3,000, that that was not enough. We lost Age UK Suffolk a number of weeks after that fundraising campaign, just when we needed it more than ever.

I spoke in my maiden speech about special educational needs, and said that it was probably the No. 1 reason why I got involved in politics. As a kid, I had dyslexia and dyspraxia. I was very fortunate to go to the school that I went to, which had not only the resources but the freedoms to tailor education around me, and all of a sudden I caught up. We need to do more as a country, because no child with special educational needs should be allowed not to achieve their full potential. I have become an associate governor at Sir Bobby Robson School, which is a new special school for those with social, emotional and mental health difficulties. We have another free school for those with language difficulties opening up as well, but we also need better provision in mainstream schools.

We need to put more money into special educational needs. We need to do so for two reasons: first, because it is morally the right thing to do; and secondly, because as a society we cannot afford to lose their talents. Those with special educational needs are unconventional thinkers; they can be among the most creative thinkers. Given the right support, they can thrive, and we do not lose their talents, but given the wrong support, they often end up in our criminal justice system. I am pleased that the Education Committee has now launched an inquiry into prison education to look into that issue, among others.

The Orwell bridge, which I bang on about a lot, will hopefully be sorted out in the early new year, and the closures of the bridge that cost the local economy £1 million a day will stop. We have put in our submission for the town deal. We are going for £28 million. We were told it was for up to £25 million, but we thought, “Well, it’s Ipswich—we deserve £28 million”, so we have gone for that.

Another issue that needs sorting is cladding. A huge number of my constituents are leaseholders who have that uncertainty and anxiety hanging over them. I am pleased about the waking watch announcement today, but we need to go further.

I said last year in my maiden speech that it was the greatest thrill of my life to be elected as Member of Parliament for Ipswich. I believe it is the greatest town in this country. It has a football club that has had better days, but hopefully that can turn around soon. Obviously Portman Road will remain open, as it is in a tier 2 area. The people of Ipswich are by and large, I think, decent, patriotic, hard-working and straight-speaking. I said to them when I got elected that I would be straight-speaking as well—that I would not dodge controversial issues, but would get in there and speak my mind. Sometimes not all my constituents might agree with what I say, and I might not always deliver what I want to deliver, but I will never be missing in action. I will always be in here, active, talking up the town that I am proud to represent and that I love and that I believe, despite the current challenges, has its best days ahead of it.

Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you to all my colleagues who have helped me in my first year, and I look forward to the new year.

4.31 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Let me join others, Mr Deputy Speaker, in wishing you and all parliamentary staff a good and restful Christmas.

This has been an excellent debate. I am becoming a veteran of these events. I was particularly struck by the number of Members who raised international issues, including issues of religious persecution. I, for one, believe that we should always discuss and raise these matters in this House.

A large number of topics were dealt with, some of great importance. We heard about digital exclusion, which we will have to deal with, the fact that Remembrance Day was not quite the occasion that it usually is, and of course Southend’s city status. Let me just say to the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) that I am supportive of this, but I also hope that in 2021 we can reinstate flights from Southend to Glasgow. How good would that be? This year there was no mention of the rail service to Southend, so I do not know if it has improved, but perhaps it would be a good 2021 for the good people of Southend if we could reinstate flights from Southend to the centre of the universe.

The debate was of course dominated by covid. A number of hon. Members have said that it is not easy, and it is not. It is not easy for anybody. I was particularly pleased earlier today when the Secretary of State said in answer to my question that it is vital that we deal with the misinformation about the vaccine. We know that people have been deliberately targeted with misinformation, and it is important to deal with that.

Let us hope that the vaccine is rolled out, if for no other reason than to see the tartan army descend on Wembley stadium for the Euro championships and what I am sure will be an easy group game for Scotland.

Jim Shannon: Archie Gemmill.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman mentions Archie Gemmill. When I listened to the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), I was struck by the fact that there are none of those great Scottish players playing for Ipswich any more, like John Wark or George Burley. Perhaps there could be more Scottish signings that will raise Ipswich back to its rightful place in English football.

I am pleased that hon. Members have joined in a tradition, which I think I started, of praising, thanking and congratulating our constituency office staff. I want to thank Dominique, Christina, Greg, Keith, Scott, Tony and the great Roza Salih in the Glasgow South West office. I am quite clear that they are the best constituency office staff in these islands. Every single constituency office has had to deal with unprecedented pressures in the last year, and they have all been a credit not just to hon. Members of this House but to themselves.

I want to thank some constituency organisations for the work that they have done: G53 Together, Govan HELP, the Moogety food project, the Ridgeway Dairy with Drumoyne Community Council, the Trussell Trust and the Turf Youth Project. I particularly thank Feeding Britain, which invested £90,000 in the constituency this year for various projects.

[Chris Stephens]

Coming back to covid, there are a number of things that the Government will have to look at, and I hope that they will make permanent the £20 uplift in universal credit. That will help millions of people in this country. I also hope that they will also look at the recommendations of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions about replacing advances with non-repayable grants. That would help a number of people. It is sad that the number of deductions—that is, the money that the DWP has been taking back—has increased during the covid crisis. That does not do the Department credit. As many Members have said, it is to be hoped that the Government will find some solution to the 3 million excluded who do not receive Government support. It is important to note that there are Members across the House who believe that that needs to be done.

A number of hon. Members correctly praised public sector workers for their role during the covid crisis. I will be campaigning this year to ensure that there is no pay freeze for public sector workers. It is morally unjust and economically unsound. When public sector workers get their wages, they spend them in the private sector economy. If we are serious about helping the private sector along, I simply cannot fathom how a public sector pay freeze will help.

We also need to find a solution for the 1950s-born women. I know that hon. Members across the House see that injustice, which needs to be taken away. We need an employment Bill, which the Government have been promising for years, so that we can discuss issues about zero-hours contracts, which are prevalent in the hospitality sector. We need to deal with those issues.

I hope that the Government will start to bring issues to this place. In particular, the new immigration rules should have been brought to this Chamber for debate and discussion, as should the pilot that the Government have put in place for asylum seeker interviews. The Home Office has decided, without any reference to this Chamber, to allow Serco to carry out those interviews.

It would not be a speech from me without touching on one or two constitutional issues—[*Laughter.*] Just one or two. Today, we have another poll on Scottish independence—the 17th consecutive poll—showing yes ahead and that support for the Union is now at its lowest level. I want to thank every single Government Back Bencher for their part in that campaign.

Of course, other Members have mentioned Brexit. We do not know what kind of Brexit it will be, and it is quite ludicrous that we are going into recess today not knowing whether we are coming back next week or the week after. We are in a position of deal or no deal. I am half expecting Noel Edmonds to occupy the Front Bench with a telephone, seeing what the banker is going to come up with. It really is quite a shameful position. It just leaves me to say this. It is an old song: “We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when, but I’m sure we’ll meet again some sunny day.”

4.39 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank all hon. Members who took part in the debate, particularly those who are celebrating their first anniversary. Who would have thought on 12 December 2019 that a year later they would have been through such incredible

times? They have been through a baptism of fire. It is hard enough to get to grips with setting up offices and so many other things coming at you. Talk about a confluence of events—not only Brexit, but covid-19. Congratulations to them all.

I thank my deputy, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), who is unable to be here because he is shielding. He has done some good work on ministerial responses and we hope to publish that shortly.

The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) talked about a link road and transport. I hope he will get his meeting with the Prime Minister, because transport is vital for productivity.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra). I have been trying to reopen Pleck library in Walsall for years, and it is sad that the leader of Walsall Council has said that all the libraries should be closed. I find that quite odd.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) said he was a friend of the Deputy Chief Whip—that is a good thing to be. He rightly paid tribute to the health service, and talked about the businesses and the breweries. I thought he was going to add that he had been on a pub crawl with the Deputy Chief Whip.

Paul Holmes *indicated assent.*

Valerie Vaz: Oh, he has! His secrets are coming out now. He should have said that in his speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) rightly talked about Grenfell Tower and the cladding issue, which does not seem to be going away.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) said that the highest number of people died this year. It is an incredible figure that we have had to face. As I have said before, every single one of us knows someone who has died as a result of covid. The hon. Gentleman also rightly focused on transport.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) said that sometimes we do not see the effect of the work we do as Members of Parliament. We work for the future. She also focused on the children in her constituency, on their education and on the food that some of them are struggling to get hold of, which we would not expect. She rightly praised the work of UNICEF, despite what was said earlier in the day.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) paid tribute to the Royal Berkshire Hospital, health and care workers and other public servants. As he said, we all work for the common good.

The hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) made a good case for a port in her constituency, and she told us how important our maritime history is, what we have done as a nation and our island story.

What can we say about the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)? He is absolutely delightful. He is an institution. He gave us a great message of hope and love, including a very special prayer, and we thank him for that and wish him well.

I went to Burma with the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). She is an incredibly brave woman. She focused on the Conservative party human rights commission

and I want to join her in paying tribute to Benedict Rogers, who has done sterling work on that commission. He is incredibly brave—hon. Members should read his book on Burma and the description of how he was stopped at the airport and sometimes prevented from going in. I do not know how he did it.

We come to the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). What can we say? In previous years, he used to go around his constituency in his speech, and the joke among us all was that he did not need to send Christmas cards because he mentioned everybody. We hope that, come 2022, Southend will be a city. I think this is the start of a letter-writing campaign, and we will support the hon. Gentleman in every way we can.

The hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) mentioned motor homes and lavatories—an interesting combination; he has done well. However, he also mentioned the hospitality industry, which is on its knees and we need to ensure that we do something about it next year. I am sure that the Deputy Chief Whip has a long note about the hospitality industry.

The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) was right to mention the high street. As he is a member of the Science and Technology Committee, I am sure there is an inquiry he can organise. I feel sure he was describing a statutory nuisance, so I think there is some way he could look at that. I recommend good solicitors such as Leigh Day, although I am not sure the Government like them much. They are very good—they are the greatest for the underdog.

The hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston) is right about Royal Mail. Obviously, we have not been able to visit this year. He is also right about community hospitals. Wantage Community Hospital should be reopened. Again, everybody from the health and social care sector should be congratulated. I am sure he has a hotline to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on the birth of Amelia. What a year! We have had some of the most stressful times, but Amelia is here and all good wishes to him and his wife. We will support any attempt to honour for his constituent Rich Stephenson-Evans, given all the deliveries he has made during covid.

What an incredible story the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) gave us. It is right that we need to focus on special educational needs. I, too, make a plea to the Deputy Chief Whip. It is an important area and the hon. Member is proof that people can succeed, no matter what they have, if they have a good education. I am sure his education was under a Labour Government, who made a massive investment in education. [*Laughter.*] We, too, want to see a deal. We are not sure where we are on whether it is a deal or no deal.

I once again thank all Members for responding to being thrown in at the deep end. I just want to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmere (Chris Elmore), who has a very special event coming up. His wife, Bridie, is hopefully giving birth, so we might not see him after this, or he might be here because we might have to vote on something before 2021, but I want to thank him for casting all those hundreds of proxy votes.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I had my opportunity to thank everyone earlier. May I wish you, and everyone in this House, a very happy Christmas and a peaceful new year?

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In response to my point of order earlier this afternoon about the return of schools in January, Madam Deputy Speaker reminded us that Mr Speaker expects statements from Ministers to be brought first to this House. At 2.20 pm or thereabouts, the Department for Education issued a press release on schools' return, yet it took until nearly 4.30 pm for a written ministerial statement to be laid before the House. Parents, teachers and school leaders cannot possibly plan for January in the face of this Government chaos. Mr Deputy Speaker, with the House due to rise for the Christmas recess in just a very few minutes, how can right hon. and hon. Members have the opportunity to question Ministers about what on earth is happening?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and her forward notice of it. The Government have laid written ministerial statements in both Houses on the subject this afternoon. However, I am sure that Ministers on the Treasury Bench will have heard what the hon. Lady has had to say. We are approaching the time of new year resolutions and I can think of one for those on the Government Benches straight away on that matter, so I am extremely grateful to her for that.

We now move to—as we are giving full titles—the Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am just wondering about that amazing tie that I have been admiring for the last hour, and whether some of the coffers from the Household have gone on it. I think we are just about to be told. I call Stuart Andrew.

4.48 pm

The Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household (Stuart Andrew): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not going to comment on the tie or where it may have come from.

It is always a pleasure to take part in these debates. We have heard from colleagues from across the House raising all sorts of issues whether they be international, national or local. Every speech was clearly heartfelt and I thank them for their contributions. I, too, want to pay tribute to those Members who are new to this House. It is always difficult getting used to this place, but in this difficult year it really has been a challenge. I think they have, on all sides of the House—I mean this sincerely—done that with great professionalism. I hope that next year we can get back to some sort of normality, so that they can enjoy the rest of what this House is really like.

I would like to comment on a couple of issues that were raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) mentioned that he wants a meeting with the Prime Minister. I am not going to commit to putting a slot in the Prime Minister's diary, but I will certainly make reference to that and inform my right hon. Friend.

The hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) quite rightly spoke about libraries and paid tribute to them. I have been quite impressed myself; I have a community library in Rawdon in my own constituency, which is now fully supported by volunteers who do tremendous amounts of work. Of course, this is a good time of year to get children in particular looking at books, such as "Cinderella", "Dick Whittington", "Snow White",

[Stuart Andrew]

“Sleeping Beauty” and “Jack and the Beanstalk”—all the panto things that we can encourage them to start reading.

I am going to come on to my hon. Friend—or he was—the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes). He gave a very long list of things he wants. Father Christmas at the moment is preparing all his reindeer—Prancer, Dasher, Rudolph, Dancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner and Blitzen—to supply gifts to the children of this planet for their good behaviour; all I can say to my hon. Friend is that, if he carries on behaving well, he may be lucky in getting some of those gifts that he wants for his constituency.

However, my hon. Friend was right to raise some important issues. We have invested more than £280 billion in this very difficult year to support businesses up and down the country. It has been hugely challenging. He was right to raise the levelling-up fund, and I can assure him that it will be for all parts of the country. There is £4 billion there that is part of the wider £600 billion of infrastructure funding that we will be providing over the next five years.

My hon. Friend also quite rightly mentioned independent lifeboats. We have become dependent on charities in many walks of life and they do tremendous amounts of work. I pay tribute to all of them and the Government are doing what they can to help.

The hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) raised the very important issue of cladding. I do not think any of us will ever forget the horrific scenes we saw at Grenfell. I know that Ministers are constantly working on that, and 80% of the dangerous cladding has been removed, but there is more to do, and I will certainly make sure that that is raised with my ministerial colleagues.

Dr Julian Lewis: Although I did not make a speech in this debate, I enjoyed the others greatly and I did make a short intervention. Will my hon. Friend take back to the Government the dangers of allowing free rein to graft extra top floors on to high-rise blocks with limited planning requirements? I have personal experience, as I said, and it is a disaster in the making. We should not be encouraging it.

Stuart Andrew: I will certainly make sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is made aware of those concerns. I know that planning is an issue that we will be discussing a lot over the coming months.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) quite rightly mentioned small shops. I hope that, as we come out of the pandemic, there will be a real opportunity for many of our small town centres. Of course, the town centre fund will help us to achieve that. I am also glad that he mentioned the important issue of domestic violence; I think the Domestic Abuse Bill is one of the best things we have done in this Parliament for some time.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) mentioned children having food. I will say clearly that I do not think there is anybody in this House who does not want to see our children have food—I was in receipt of free school meals myself, so I know how challenging it can be for families—but how we achieve that is sometimes an area of debate. The

Government are trying to do it through a targeted approach, so that the neediest children receive that help, and we will continue to do so.

The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), like many others, thanked our voluntary groups and the many key workers who have worked incredibly hard to ensure that all the services run as best they can in these challenging times. I must say that I dispute his call for us to look at the Christmas rules again; personal responsibility will allow us and our families to have some time together in what has been a very difficult year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) reminded me a little of Queen Elizabeth I, who was at Tilbury fort, and I can imagine that my hon. Friend will be rallying the troops to ensure that her bid for a freeport is successful. From listening to the impressive amount of work that the partnership has been doing, I hope that its bid will be looked at with great interest by Ministers. Bidding closes on 5 February, so we will wait and see. I am sure she will be popping the champagne. [Interruption.] I cannot give that commitment, but let us hope she will be popping the champagne—that is how I had better put it.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is always the most courteous man. He appears in every debate that happens, whether here or in Westminster Hall. I was somewhat surprised once when I was leading a debate on HS2 to see him walking in, as I was thinking, “How on earth are we going to connect London to Leeds and then across to Northern Ireland?” However, he managed to get a perfect intervention in. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) talked about the serious human rights issues and, of course, what is going on in China. It is absolutely right, as was mentioned, that we raise these issues here. The Government are working with all our international partners to ensure that we speak up when there are human rights abuses.

Now I come on to the masterclass from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). If I were to try to answer everything he raised, we would be here until new year’s eve. However, I will ensure that, as he wanted, he gets a reply to the letter he sent. He raised very important issues, including, of course, the city status one. My little briefing note here may give him some cause for an opportunity, as it says, “The Cabinet Office continues to explore whether there is an appropriate royal occasion on which to hold a city status competition.” We all know that there is one coming, so let us see whether he is finally successful. I have no idea what he will talk about afterwards if that ever happens.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) certainly showed what a busy year he has had, and, yes, I too was intrigued by the combination of motor homes, tax relief and public toilets. I am glad that he mentioned the private Members’ Bills, and I want to thank him for the support he gave to our colleague my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) with her private Member’s Bill. I am her Whip and I know that she was extremely grateful for that support. He also mentioned dull Christmas lights. I can tell him that we had the same problem in my constituency, but through a lot of hard work from community volunteers we have been able to change a lot of the town. The only problem I would warn him about is that this results in being up ladders in the freezing cold of November, but it is worth doing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) raised the serious issue of landfill in his constituency. Clearly, this is not a very pleasant experience for those residents, and I will raise the matter with my colleagues in the relevant Department. I say to the company involved that it really should engage. I think we can all say that companies that engage effectively with our communities certainly get a better response.

I am running out of time, so I had better finish by saying that my hon. Friends the Members for Wantage (David Johnston), for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) and for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) all gave great speeches about their constituencies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North on the birth of Amelia. I am also glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich raised the issue of special educational needs, because I have always believed it is an important area where we can get the very best opportunities for everybody.

I want to finish by wishing the whole House a very happy Christmas. Happy Christmas to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to Mr Speaker and to the other Deputy Speakers. On behalf of the whole House, we would like to thank all Members, the peers, the staff of the House, civil servants, security, cleaners, broadcasting, *Hansard*, catering and the doorkeepers, who always keep us in order—mainly. They have been helping to keep Parliament working safely during what has been an incredibly difficult time in this pandemic. We also thank Members' staff, who have sometimes had to face a lot of abuse—that is just not on, and they do so with such good grace. We have done a lot in this pandemic: there 188 Divisions have been, and 190 statutory instruments have been passed since March. That is thanks to everybody who has worked so hard. So I wish everybody a very happy Christmas, and let us hope for a much better new year.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): On behalf of Mr Speaker and his team, I would like to thank everybody Stuart just mentioned, particularly the technicians, who have worked incredible miracles to ensure that the democracy we have here has been able to operate. It has been an awful year, but it has created angels and heroes, and we salute them, topped by the national health service and the scientists who have created a vaccine, which has given us all so much hope that 2021 will be a much better year. I will stop short of saying, “all I want for Christmas is you”—I am not going to ask for miracles—but I do know that all I want for the new year is that everyone who needs a job gets one, in order that we can get our country and the world back to where we were. Merry Christmas everybody, and a happy new year.

PETITION

Preserving Piles Coppice Wood

5 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Coventry South regarding Piles Coppice wood, an area of woodland to the south-east of Coventry. There is an online petition on the same topic, which has been signed by just under 1,500 people.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Coventry South,

Declares that Piles Coppice Wood is a valuable remnant of ancient woodland that is home to rare and beautiful wildlife and vegetation; and notes residents' fear that Warwickshire Wildlife Trust's plans would damage the woodland.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to preserve this ancient woodland and protect our natural environment.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002641]

Free Sanitary Products in Schools

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

5.1 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is my honour to have what might be the last debate in this parliamentary year, and I thank Mr Speaker for granting it.

Over half the population expect to have periods most months from roughly their early teens until some point in their 40s or 50s. If you are lucky, you know when to expect your period and what it will be like. You can have the pads, tampons or whatever you use ready to hand. If you are lucky, you can afford to buy supplies or have supportive parents to ensure that you do. If you are lucky as a young person, particularly when you have your first period, you will have someone supportive whom you can trust to go to with all your questions.

But that is not true for everyone, particularly for too many school students, and this debate is about them. They need to have access to free menstrual supplies that are easily accessible when they need them, so that they do not miss school either through embarrassment or because they are not prepared to spend the rest of their day relying on toilet paper in their underpants.

I would like to start by thanking Members who attended the inaugural meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on period equality on 1 December. I was pleased to be elected as chair, and I thank the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), as well as my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), who all agreed to be officers of the APPG.

I pay tribute to the amazing work done in this place on the issue of period poverty by my friend, the former Member for Dewsbury, Paula Sherriff. In considering the Government's free period products scheme, I would like to pay tribute to those who have got us and the Government to where we are. There have there been so many activists, but I pay particular tribute to the charity Free Periods, including its founder, Amika George, and Gemma and Hannah, who have been campaigning tirelessly on this issue. I would also like to thank all the other groups across the country, often local and community-based groups. Yeliz Kazim, the lead volunteer with Hounslow Red Box project, worked tirelessly to ensure that schools and other local centres across the borough of Hounslow had access to period products from 2017 until last year when the Government scheme came in.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate. Several campaigns were started some years ago, before the schemes from the Governments in Scotland and Wales, and indeed the UK Government, came in, and they included one called Wings Cymru in my constituency, which was led by several of my constituents. One who springs to mind is Ceri Reeves, who collected sanitary products and distributed them around schools. Wings Cymru became such a large organisation that it started to distribute them around the further education colleges as well. Those community campaigners—in Wings Cymru's case, all women—have been out there collecting, delivering and ensuring that young women and girls have that

security to be able to carry on their education. It is those organisations and people who have made the difference, and who have made Ministers listen and ensured that we have the funding to support them.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend gives a brilliant description of a project in his constituency, and I know there are many others across the UK that, like the Hounslow Red Box scheme and Wings Cymru, are run by volunteers. They raise money, buy period products and deliver them in their distinctive red boxes, often with valuable and informative health leaflets. Hounslow Red Box also included clean new pants, tights and deodorant.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing forward the debate. I have supported the campaign in my own constituency by making sure that Ards and North Down Borough Council is bringing in the procedures that it needs to. It might be of some help to her, and hopefully to the Minister, to know that my colleague, the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Minister, Peter Weir, will shortly be submitting a document on provision for tackling period poverty in schools to the Northern Ireland Executive, and is looking forward to its roll-out in 2021. Does the hon. Lady not agree that more Departments should assess their role in combating period poverty, and that perhaps even here on the mainland we should have the same thing as we are going to have in Northern Ireland very shortly?

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. This is about more than just schools and more than just one part of the UK.

My focus today is on education, but this issue has much wider implications. It is vital that free period products are available in all sorts of venues and facilities, from leisure centres and community spaces to workplaces and further education colleges—in fact, anywhere where there are likely to be people on low incomes who might be caught short and need access.

Scotland led the way last month by passing a Bill that will ensure that free period products are available in all public places. It was moved by Labour's Monica Lennon MSP, but supported by all parties and passed with no opposition. In Monica's recent speech in the Scottish Parliament, she was absolutely right to say that the passage of that Bill showed that Parliament could be a force for good. She said:

"Our prize is the opportunity to consign period poverty to history. In these dark times, we can bring light and hope to the world".—[*Scottish Parliament Official Report*, 24 November 2020; c. 76.]

As chair of the APPG, I am looking forward to hearing Monica speak at our next meeting and seeing how something similar could be introduced in England.

In England, following the success of the Red Box schemes and campaigners, the Government finally brought in a scheme to introduce free period products to schools, which was rolled out in January. The schools have to ask to get access to the scheme. Our concern was that if there was insufficient take-up by schools, the funding would be pulled and the scheme would end, so we have been encouraging Members to contact their schools about this. It is not often I say that I am pleased with this Government lately, but I am really pleased that, last night, they announced that the scheme would be extended through the full 2021 calendar year. That is very welcome.

As I said, the scheme is being taken up by schools across the country, including many in my constituency. I know from speaking to young people that it has made a huge difference and they really appreciate it. There are fundamental reasons why the scheme is so important. We know what it is like to be in a toilet where there is no paper. Having no pad or tampon to hand when your period arrives is the same feeling. Of course, it is far worse for young people without the cash to buy them.

We need to ensure that any such free period product scheme has three key attributes. We need to remove the stigma around period products; we need to remove the postcode lottery that has meant that people have relied on charities and even teaching staff to provide free products—they should be available in all schools; and, most important, we need to ensure that no student misses out on time in the classroom because they have their period but no menstrual protection.

A 2019 report found that half those who said they had missed schooling because of their period had done so because they could not afford to pay for period products. I am concerned that the coronavirus is fuelling this inequality even further. The problem might now be even greater, as the new figures coming in show that the pandemic has plunged more families into poverty. We know that we have a serious problem in this country when UNICEF is funding work here.

An important part of the scheme—and, indeed, of this whole debate—is tackling stigma and making it not only okay but perfectly acceptable and normal to discuss issues relating to periods. I am glad that this place has got much better in recent years, although I found out that the words “tampon” or “sanitary towel” were not used here until May 1987—and that was in relation to airport security. Despite the title of this debate, Paula Sherriff reminded me today that we should not be using the word “sanitary”. Let us get away from the idea that menstrual products and menstruation imply uncleanness; having a period is not dirty or insanitary, although without protection it is messy.

Let me address the uptake of the Government’s free period products scheme in schools. The figures show us that by August only 40% of schools had signed up; will the Minister tell us the current level of take-up? In response to a written question, the Minister said,

“we are continuing to monitor orders closely”,

so I hope she will be able to provide further information. It is so important that schools sign up, and they can do so easily by going to the Free Periods website, which has a useful guide and toolkit to help schools. It also offers help on how to lobby MPs and on how MPs can encourage their local schools to take up the scheme. I have been working hard to make the scheme available in local schools, as have my colleagues, but MPs can do so much more.

Funding into next year would be much appreciated, but I have some other requests of the Government. It should not be left to charities such as Free Periods to do the heavy lifting in promoting the scheme when the Department for Education has a much louder megaphone to use. I know that the Department says:

“We intend to publish positive stories from organisations that have benefited from the scheme”,

but I would like to know what the Government have been doing beyond that. What urgent work has been and is being done to promote the scheme directly in schools?

It has been such a tough year for schools and staff, and heads have had more than enough to deal with, so the easier take-up is made, the better. When I met one local headteacher, she told me about the difficulty they had in understanding the reams of directives that arrive every week; let us make it easier so that this is not yet another hurdle they have to jump. I hope the Minister will take that back to the Department.

As we end this year, I wish to speak about the future of the scheme. I hope the Minister will outline in further detail the plans for next year. Will the same amount of funding be available as was available for this past year? If schools do not use all their allocated funding by the end of the year, will they be able to roll it over and use it in future? The success of the scheme rests on as many schools as possible signing up to it. When the scheme was launched, the Minister responsible at the time, the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), who is now the Minister for Universities, said that the Government would consider making the scheme mandatory if take-up was not high enough. What level of take-up does the Minister think is acceptable? Does the Department have any plans to make it an opt-out rather than opt-in scheme?

Will the Government draw on our Red Box experience in Hounslow and consider extending the scheme to include other products, such as pants and tights? They are particularly valuable, because it is one thing to have a clean pad or tampon, but another to have to put back on the same pants and tights. That is certainly what the volunteers in our Red Box scheme put in, because of the feedback from students and schools. I hope that when the Minister gives her response, she will set out what the plans for the scheme are and what changes there will be.

While I congratulate the Government on their decision to continue the scheme, it is certainly not the end of the issue of access to free period products generally, as I have said. As the Scottish example shows, there are other venues and places where people, particularly those with no money or very little money, get help and support, such as food banks, citizens advice bureaux and those who support refugees. I have often visited these sorts of projects and places and they are wonderful people doing wonderful things—they provide food, they often provide razors and they provide toys for children—but sometimes they do not provide period products. I think that that needs to be considered because, as I say, period products are as necessary as food to eat and toilet paper.

Finally, Mr Deputy Speaker, as this is the official end of the parliamentary year, I wish you and your team, all the staff of Parliament who support us, all our parliamentary staff and other Members here—those who are left—a happy, peaceful and restful Christmas. Here is hoping that 2021 is a happier year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you, Ruth.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing a debate on

[Vicky Ford]

such an important topic. We are absolutely committed to providing world-class education, training and care for everyone, and no one—no young person—should be held back from reaching their potential because of their gender or background.

The onset of menstruation can be confusing and even alarming, especially if the child or young person is not adequately prepared. At such a challenging time, it is vital that our students get the help and support that they need to access period products. After all, how can young people engage in their learning if they are worried about being caught out? Two years ago, in Parliament Week, members of the guides from Essex told me that this was happening to girls in my constituency—they were missing school because of their periods—and I joined Members from across both sides of the House in campaigning for free period products in schools.

Back in 2019, in the spring statement, I was delighted when the Government committed to making free period products available in education. Last January, we rolled out a scheme so that students in primary schools, secondary schools and colleges across England have been able to access free period products in their place of study when they need them. I am delighted that we are extending that support until next December.

Our period product scheme helps young people to go about their daily lives without getting caught out if they come on their period unexpectedly and have forgotten to bring products with them, or if they cannot afford the products they need. Ordering the products is easy. Schools and colleges can log on to an online portal and order a range of products from our supplier, PHS, as and when they need them. This demonstrates an effective use of public funds and allows us to base spend on demand rather than making assumptions about take-up.

Periods are a very personal experience and young people inevitably have a range of priorities when it comes to selecting the most appropriate product, including whether it is familiar to them, comfortable and environmentally friendly. In research commissioned by the Department, young people felt that the scheme should prioritise the comfort of learners, and therefore we offer a wide range of products. Our product range includes environmentally friendly tampons and pads alongside reusable products such as menstrual cups and reusable pads. Schools and colleges have freedom to select the most suitable products, considering cost and type of products. Once the products have been delivered free of charge, schools and colleges decide how these are made available to learners.

I encourage all organisations to review our guidance, which was developed through consultation with stakeholders, including campaigns such as the Red Box Project and the Department's life skills division, alongside commissioned research with learners. It explains the simple steps required to order the products and gives advice on how to ensure that they are effectively distributed.

A vital element of the scheme is ensuring that learners are aware that the products are available when they need them. It can be challenging for some schools and colleges to communicate, especially where teachers and students find it difficult to talk openly about periods. Periods are a natural process, but too often a stigma is associated with menstruation. We are taking action to tackle that

through the new health education curriculum, which became compulsory for pupils in all state-funded schools in England from September this year.

Our statutory guidance instructs that both boys and girls should be taught key facts about the menstrual cycle, including what is an average period, the range of period products and the implications for emotional and physical health. We have developed a “Changing adolescent body” teacher training module, which sets out what should be covered in primary and secondary education regarding menstrual health and wellbeing.

I want teachers to feel confident in working with their students to tackle the stigma around menstruation. Over the coming year, we will evaluate the uptake of training around the relationship, sex and health education curriculum and ask teachers how they feel about delivering it. Periods can be particularly challenging for some learners, and we will give further consideration as to whether it would be appropriate to provide additional guidance to schools around, for example, endometriosis.

Beyond the health education curriculum content, our statutory guidance directs schools to make adequate and sensitive arrangements to help girls prepare for and manage periods, including requests for period products. Even small changes, such as using the term “period products”, rather than “sanitary products” can help shift the conversation from the suggestion that menstruation is unhygienic.

The great work of the Government in supporting people with menstruation is not limited to schools and colleges. Since 2015, we have awarded £15 million through the tampon tax fund to support vulnerable and excluded women and girls. Projects that are being supported this year include ones that work to support victims of domestic abuse and eating disorder sufferers, and offer mentoring for disadvantaged young women.

Last year, the Government launched a cross-sectoral period poverty taskforce to develop sustainable expert solutions to end period poverty and shame in the UK. Alongside that, NHS England has announced that it will offer period products to every hospital patient who needs them, and the Home Office changed the law to ensure that all people in custody are provided with free health and hygiene products, including period products.

The Department for International Development announced a global campaign of action to end period poverty and shame by 2030, which was kick-started with an allocation of up to £2 million for small and medium charities working on period poverty and shame in our priority countries. The Chancellor has made it clear that from 1 January next year, a zero rate of VAT will apply to period products.

Since our period product scheme was launched in January, it has been fantastic to see many schools and colleges using the scheme. It has remained in operation throughout the period of partial closures of schools and colleges. Even with the challenges of the pandemic, in August PHS reported that almost 40% of eligible organisations had ordered products through the scheme. Orders have increased significantly since schools and colleges reopened fully in September, and the Department will publish management information from the period product scheme on 21 January next year, once the scheme has operated for 12 months.

In the light of the benefits I have outlined, I am pleased to confirm that the scheme will continue until next December, with all eligible schools and colleges receiving new spend cap allocations on 4 January next year. We are clear that organisations should have products available should learners need them. We also know that many schools and colleges have benefited from the support of charities over recent years, and I thank those organisations for their support.

Schools and colleges do not have to use the national scheme to purchase products if they prefer to use an alternative route, although the costs are only met if they use the Department's scheme. With that in mind, our supplier PHS will proactively contact those schools and colleges that have not accessed the scheme. Organisations that have already ordered products should continue to use their existing account and login details. The contact details for PHS and more information about the scheme are clearly set out in guidance on gov.uk.

This is an issue that mostly affects women and girls, and as this may be the last debate of the year, I would like to end it by thanking a few of the inspirational women I have been honoured to come across this year. First, I would like to thank Helen Waite, who runs the period product scheme at the Department for Education. She also set up the free school meals voucher scheme during covid, and right now she is working flat out to launch our holiday activity and food schemes across all of England for vulnerable children in the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays next year.

I would like to thank Sarah Lewis, the director at the DFE who is Helen's line manager and also manages the early years team. She has been an inspirational leader in a difficult year, and today is her last day in the Department as she is going to work on the frontline of education.

We will miss her greatly, but I know that the frontline will benefit greatly too. I would also like to thank our new permanent secretary, Susan Acland-Hood, who has made such a big difference in the Department since joining us.

I thank Dame Christine Lenehan from the Council for Disabled Children, and Tina Emery, the co-chair of the National Network of Parent Carer Forums. They do inspirational work to support children and young people with disabilities, and have made sure that these very vulnerable children have certainly not been forgotten during this pandemic.

Thank you to Jenny Coles, the president of the Association of Directors of Children's Services; to Isabelle Trowler, the chief social worker; and to social workers across the country, many of whom are women, for the work that they do, again, to support vulnerable children and their families. Lastly, I would like to thank Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner, for her very hard-working years of service. I have no doubt that our preferred candidate to be her successor, Dame Rachel de Souza, will continue that excellent work.

Finally, I say to girls all over the country: this has been a year of huge disruption, but do not miss out on your education because you have your period. Make sure your school or college signs up to our period product scheme. You are our future, and awesome women all across the country are backing you all the way. Merry Christmas.

Question put and agreed to.

5.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 17 December 2020

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Fairs and Showgrounds

1.30 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new call list system and to ensure that social distancing can be respected. Members must arrive for the start of debates in Westminster Hall—I think everyone is here—and they are expected to remain for the wind-ups provided there is space in the room. Members are also asked to respect the one-way system around the room. Please exit by the door on the left. Members should sanitise their microphones using the cleaning materials provided before they use them and dispose of the cleaning materials as they leave the room.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the future of fairs and showgrounds.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, which was sought by me and fellow friends and Members of the all-party parliamentary group on fairs and showgrounds. One of the great and unique privileges I have as MP for Glasgow East is representing the largest settlement of showpeople in the country. My own home in Carntyne overlooks the many yards that host caravans and fairground equipment. Indeed, the train journey from the city centre, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), to Shettleston in my constituency largely passes the hundreds of showpeople families who live alongside the railway line.

I have learned a lot about the traditions and customs of showpeople from growing up in the east end and now being their Member of Parliament, such as how showpeople have long lineages in the community—many families have worked at the same fairs for generations—and identify as their own cultural group. In the 2021 census, showpeople will have the opportunity for the first time ever to identify as precisely that, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) who, when he was a Cabinet Office Minister, worked with me and the Showmen's Guild to secure that. It is right that that option be available, because showpeople are unique.

Last week, I spoke to one woman whose children are the eighth generation to work as showpeople. This is a community with a rich history that deserves its recognition. I say all that because there is often a fundamental misunderstanding about showpeople, their history and their vital place in our communities. It is important throughout the debate that we remember we are discussing real people with families and lives; this is not about money and businesses.

In Glasgow East, showpeople are a huge and valued part of the constituency. They are small business owners who support the local economy, putting on seasonal

fairs from summer fetes to Christmas markets, and often engage quietly in philanthropic work that is perhaps not celebrated enough. There are currently 340 operating members of the Scottish Showmen's Guild, and they have families, numbering 5,000 across Scotland, with the majority of them split between my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central.

Put simply, showpeople have been a rich part of Scotland's tapestry for hundreds of years and have a proud history and heritage. Indeed, this year the historic Kirkcaldy Links market did not go ahead, for the first time in several hundred years. I am afraid it is a sobering fact that even the second world war could not stop the market, but it unfortunately fell to the pandemic. I was greatly concerned when most major fairs were understandably cancelled for 2020 at the outset of the pandemic, because that greatly impacted the livelihoods of all showpeople. At the heart of the issue is how the Government's financial support packages during the pandemic have continually excluded showpeople, mostly owing to the manner in which showpeople live and operate, such as not having a static business or shop front.

The community provides so much not only to my constituency and all across Scotland, but across the British Isles. They deserve the same financial support that other industries have received during the pandemic. We should follow in the footsteps of other European countries, and Belgium in particular, where the Government put in place several support measures for showpeople, including a delay in, reduction of or exemption from social contributions to be paid in 2021, as well as a bonus of €4,000 and, after 21 days of non-activity, €160 a day. Alongside a financial support package, there should be 100% relief on licences for the year, similar to the 100% business rate relief for static businesses, to help showpeople and their businesses survive this tough time.

It is not just Belgium that has put its money where its mouth is. Following a rather epic lobbying effort on the part of myself, Richard Lyle MSP and Alex James Colquhoun of the Scottish Showmen's Guild, I was delighted to see that a £1.5 million funding package was made available specifically for fairs and showgrounds in Scotland just last week. I would argue that it is time the UK Government looked to do likewise for guild members in England, who I know were looking on last week rather enviously.

Alongside the exclusion from the British Government's support schemes, many showpeople have told me that there has been wild inconsistency in how local authorities have been treating fairs and showgrounds during the pandemic. Some local authorities have enacted strict bans, and others are being more lenient by allowing some fairs to go ahead. Put simply, there is a postcode lottery at local authority level, even though central Government guidance is crystal clear.

There are also inconsistencies in the regulations that fairs must adhere to in order to ensure that they are covid-secure—for example, there are different rules around mask wearing, social distancing and hand sanitising. Such inconsistencies have been exacerbated by different tiers with different rules, so there needs to be clear guidance from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on which fairs can go ahead, with consistent regulations for fairs across the country. There is also a clear role for the Minister and his Department.

[David Linden]

Many people have expressed to me concerns about local authorities cancelling 2021 fairs already, and I am afraid that guild members are right to feel that such decisions are a little premature and continue to put at risk their income for next year. Following last week's news of the first vaccine roll-out, I think we would all agree that 2021 looks to be more hopeful for us all. However, I wonder whether more updated guidance could be dispersed to local authorities on the cancelling of fairs and shows for 2021.

Ultimately, this is all about security and certainty for a community who have experienced so much hardship this year. I am afraid that their concerns are not solely limited to the pandemic. The showpeople I have spoken to have raised the issue of red diesel. For many showpeople, their entire business, and often their sole revenue, involves the hire of mobile road-tow generators, all of which are engine-operated and run on red diesel. For many showpeople, red diesel is crucial to their business, and it is impossible for them to move towards using anything else at the time, as there is a lack of a commercially viable alternative. My understanding is that the change in tax relief on red diesel is expected to take effect from 2023, although some sectors, such as farming and fishing, will continue to be eligible for the duty. Many showpeople have described to me how the change will unfairly disadvantage them and their business, so I would be grateful if the Minister could reflect those concerns to his colleagues in Her Majesty's Treasury.

Ultimately, this debate is hugely important in highlighting the cultural significance of showpeople, their history and their lineage, which spans many generations. The community have faced huge challenges as a result of the pandemic, and they now face financial hardship as a result of lost business. From uncertainty over their businesses and livelihoods, to insecurity over the future of fairs, it has been an incredibly tough year for them. I hope that the UK Government will express a genuine commitment to supporting showpeople and will consider the suggestions made by me and colleagues who speak in the debate. Ultimately, I hope that 2021 will be brighter for all of us, including showpeople, who just want to do what they do best: creating the fun of the fair.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 3 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 2.27 pm, and the guideline limits will be 10 minutes for the SNP, 10 minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Mr Linden will then have three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. There are five Back-Bench speakers, the first of whom is James Wild.

1.39 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing the debate. As a fellow member of the APPG on fairs and showgrounds, I am grateful for the great work that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) have done on this issue over so many years.

As a new MP, my interest in this subject comes from the King's Lynn mart, which is the oldest fair in the country. Its traditional Valentine's Day opening ceremony marks the first event in the travelling showman's calendar. This year, I was delighted to attend the 816th mart and be part of the procession through the town, before taking part in some competitive dodgem driving and whizzing down the helter-skelter. Despite what is known locally as mart weather, the event was typically popular, with families coming along to enjoy the rides and attractions with great optimism about what was to come. A little more than a month later, however, we entered a national lockdown and everything changed.

I am speaking in this debate to represent, in particular, my constituent Colleen Roper. She is the sixth generation of a fairground family, and I encourage everyone to visit her fairground, Rainbow Park in Hunstanton. Along with five other female showmen, she formed the Future 4 Fairgrounds group. They did so as wives and mothers, proud of their heritage, but increasingly concerned about the impact on the future of their families and that of the 20,000 showmen across the United Kingdom. They want to celebrate their history, to highlight the present situation and to talk about the future for fairgrounds.

In that spirit, I will focus my remarks on three areas. First, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East touched on, there is a need for greater consistency between the national guidance and how local authorities are acting on the ground. The DCMS position is admirably clear, as my hon. Friend the Minister recently set out to me in a written answer:

"Funfairs and fairgrounds...will be permitted to reopen in all three tiers as they were prior to this period",

the second "period of national restrictions". The answer also talked about

"how Local Authorities should support event organisers to hold outdoor events safely."

That is great, so what is the problem? As we heard, the organisers need to get permission from local authorities. Future 4 Fairgrounds told me this morning that it has continued to see cancellations of winter fairgrounds and, even worse, that fairgrounds have been stopped from operating shows that they had been told could go ahead. That has been an issue since 4 July, when covid-secure events were allowed to happen.

Fairgrounds spent considerable amounts of money and effort to be covid-secure, and it has been incredibly frustrating for them not to be able to have their events while other events have gone ahead. We should not underestimate either the financial impact of that, or the mental health and wellbeing impact of having all those events cancelled. Will the Minister work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to provide more encouragement, or perhaps even give direction, to local authorities to tackle that inconsistency, so that funfairs and fairgrounds can safely reopen across the country?

Secondly, fairgrounds are an important part of our rich cultural heritage. This is a profession that dates back hundreds of years. Showmen are businessmen and women, but they are also a community. The King's Lynn mart was granted its royal charter by Henry VIII, and many fairs across the country have been a staple of their communities for generations. In the 1860s, Frederick Savage of Lynn began supplying steam-powered fairgrounds

rides, as is recorded in the Lynn museum—again, I encourage people to visit. In the words of his 1902 “Catalogue for Roundabouts”,

“we have patented and placed upon the market all the principal novelties that have delighted the many thousands of pleasure seekers at home and abroad.”

Fairgrounds are places where memories are made. Despite that, as Future 4 Fairgrounds has highlighted, travelling fairgrounds are not being given equal status with theatres, museums and other organisations in applying to the cultural recovery fund. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister, when he responds to the debate, addressed those concerns and gave an assurance that any future applications will be considered on equal terms.

Finally, this debate is about the future of fairgrounds. They do have a future and they must have a future, but showmen’s lives have been put on hold. For all the families in the showmen’s community, there is a need for greater certainty for the winter events and for next season. Discussions are ongoing about the Lynn mart next year—I encourage my hon. Friend the Minister to join me at that excellent event. I hope that in 2021, once again, across the country, people will be able to enjoy a local fairground.

1.43 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing the debate.

I come from the best seaside town there is: sunny South Shields. We have had a static fair, Ocean Beach Pleasure Park, since about 1945. Before that, travelling fairgrounds would visit us on a regular basis. Both have continued to exist as long as I can remember, and both, despite me often being sick on rides, have always brought a great big smile to my face. Showmen and women are generous and kind people who make a valued contribution to our local economy. The money they make, they spend locally, and the footfall they generate benefits us all too. It is no wonder that some families come to visit them time and again, because the travelling showmen and women become part of our community, and we become part of theirs.

Over this pandemic, I have spoken to many of my local showmen and women. Just recently, I met a hard-working group of women campaigning not just to save their livelihood, but to preserve their heritage and culture for their children and grandchildren. As the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) said, the group is called Future 4 Fairgrounds. Those women told me, “This is not just a job. It’s a way of life and living. We are the fair and the fair is us.” It is deeply personal for them. They are mothers and wives who work day and night all over our country. They drive lorries, set up equipment and run businesses all year round. Fairs really are a family affair. It is a multimillion-pound business, which is about not just fairgrounds, but festivals, bonfire night, entertainment, Christmas light switch-ons, private events, weddings and much more.

Many showmen and women cannot help feeling that they are being discriminated against in the pandemic. From the evidence that I have seen, it appears that they are right to feel that way, because they are being discriminated against. What else could it be, when Government guidance said that, as of 4 July, travelling fairs could operate

under all tiers, some with up to 2,000 people, yet time and again, after turning up and getting ready, overzealous local councils or public health teams have told them at the 11th hour to dramatically reduce their numbers or close down altogether? In some cases, the council has given them the green light, but the county council or parish council has come along and tried to override that decision. Yet funfairs have covid-secure measures in place and there is no concrete evidence to show that they contribute dramatically to the spread of the virus.

The final kick in the teeth is that when fairs have been told to close, nearby static fairs or theme parks have remained open, and markets have sprung up in their place. I cannot imagine how utterly soul-destroying it must be for them to travel for miles, unpack all their equipment, only to be told to pack it back up and then see another event, which is not as safe or secure, occupy the land and space that they were promised.

Fairs are limited in their ability to speak out, because they do not want to damage their existing relationships with local councils, or scupper their future events. Worse still, when they have been told that they cannot operate, the councils and public health teams have not been clear about why, so they are completely in the dark. They approach the next town or area not knowing whether the same thing will happen again.

I am unaware of any other sector where that level of inconsistency is being applied. Crystal-clear guidance is needed for councils to follow because, at the moment, it seems that they are picking out bits from the general guidance and making the wrong decisions. If there was ever a time that our nation’s spirits needed to be lifted by the fun of the fair, it is most definitely now. I hope that the Minister will at least commit to issuing clearer guidance.

Showmen and women have lost every season this year. They typically take only January as leave. The unique nature of their work, where some are self-employed and some have limited companies, and where many do not have premises, has meant that they are part of the 3 million excluded from Government schemes. The Chancellor and the Government deny that those 3 million people exist, but trust me, they do. If the party of business keeps burying its head, it will lead to the collapse of this industry and many others. A proper package of support is long overdue.

Some showmen and women were eligible for bounce back loans, which they have used to upkeep their equipment—maintenance, testing and insurance. As the Minister knows, however, those loans must be paid back. In short, the situation is unsustainable, with their debt increasing at a time when they do not know when they will be able to operate or have an income again. I sincerely do not want this part of our country’s heritage to disappear, so I hope that the Minister will be able to offer them something positive today, because right now it certainly is not fun, and it most definitely is not fair.

1.49 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Thank you for allowing me to join this great debate, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing the debate and on his previous speech in the main Chamber, which resonated hugely with every showman family in the country. There are

[Richard Graham]

hon. Members present from Scotland, North West Norfolk, South Shields, Sedgefield, Southend West, as well as the great city of Gloucester. That represents a strong interest across the British Isles and strong voices speaking up for the Showmen's Guild, its members and their families. As the hon. Member for Glasgow East said, this is above all about families and lives. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) made the point that we are all, in a sense, showmen. This is probably a good moment for me to declare an interest: I am an honorary member of the Showmen's Guild—an honour given to me very kindly after some issues about education were resolved some years ago under the coalition Government.

We are all, in a sense, showmen, because we all have those early memories of candy floss, toffee apples and bumper cars. I remember my sisters on the horses on the merry-go-round. In today's world, it is shooting down water slides, charging off into the sky on a rocket that hopefully comes back, the darts, the traditional air guns and the fluffy toys. All those things make up children's memories in every generation, so in a sense we are all part of it.

In Gloucester and the western section of the Showmen's Guild, we do not have fairs that have been going quite as long as the one in King's Lynn, but the Barton Fayre on the Ham, for example, has been going for at least 130 years, and there are at least 60 families still living on Alney island and Pool meadow. They are invariably threatened every year by the possibility of flooding from the River Severn, of which the Minister will be very conscious, given his experience of that river. They all contribute hugely to the life of the city, just as they do to the lives of the towns and rural areas that other colleagues will refer to.

During the incredibly difficult time this year, the showmen were not just sitting at home grumbling because some of their fairs had been cancelled. They got up and used their skills in a whole number of other ways. Those who had the very long vehicles that take the big machinery to the fairs turned their skills to helping the supermarkets deliver food across the country, to ensure that those who are vulnerable and need protecting were fed.

As a society and a community, those are some of the most positive people we could ever hope to meet. They do not ask a great deal of Government. They are independent-minded. They want to be able to get on with life, solve their own problems and not fall back on the state the whole time. That is not their natural inclination at all, but at the moment, given this downfall of probably 80% of their normal income, they have turned to the Government for help, and there are one or two things that could be done.

First, the Government should signal to all local councils, and all MPs should make it clear in our communities, that it is possible to hold fairs; there is nothing in the law to prevent them. We should highlight that with sensible safety guidance and guidelines, these things can be done safely. That is really important.

The second thing is all about local councils and their ability to dispense cash grants to businesses in trouble. It is perfectly possible for every council to be able to consider applications from the showmen, just as they would consider applications from anybody else in their communities. I am calling on the individual businesses

within the Showmen's Guild in my city or elsewhere to apply to the council, and for the council to consider their cases really seriously. We do not want to find that those fairs, Christmas markets and the activities that the showmen have carried out for hundreds of years are suddenly no longer with us. That would be a huge sadness in every community group.

In our case, the fair did go ahead in the summer safely, but I was concerned to see that, elsewhere in the country, some of our colleagues in Parliament were questioning why the fairs were being held, calling for them not to happen and telling their councils that they disagreed with the decision. As a body, Parliament needs to be stronger in support of every community during their hour of need. It needs to support the showmen and the councils in making those brave decisions. We should remind our constituents that nobody has to go; these fairs are entirely voluntary events. Each family will make its own decision on its own bubble and safety assessment. That is a very important part of the individual responsibility for safety during this difficult time.

The Minister has been a good supporter of so many things during this difficult year. As he will know, the showmen are not just running fairs and Christmas markets, important though those two things are as the core of their activity. They also do other things. For example, all the catering at Kingsholm for Gloucester Rugby, at Twickenham, and possibly even at the Worcester Warriors, which is very close to my hon. Friend the Minister's heart, is done by Showmen's Guild members. Those activities have obviously also been hit this year. We are fortunate to have some spectators in Kingsholm, but nothing like the normal crowds that gather, as the Minister knows.

It has been a difficult year and we all want to support them. The structure of their businesses does not make it easy, as there are no business rates involved and the furlough scheme does not always apply, but we should think more widely because, of course, they are also employers of many young people—including at some point in the past, one of my sons—working for them in jobs that do not require huge skills but which give young people the opportunity to get their first work experience and learn the disciplines and customer service and so on that come with that. They are a key part of our society and our country. I look forward to hearing whether the Minister will agree with the two key points and about any further support he believes might be given.

1.56 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this debate. It is not just the coronavirus pandemic that is causing such a tough time for fairs and showgrounds. There are many other factors.

One factor is certainly fashion. The APPG for these organisations used to be hugely important in the House of Commons, with a very large attendance and proceedings overseen by none other than the Speaker's father, the noble Lord Hoyle. It was the thing to do to be at those events. Fashions have changed and there are many reasons for that. Of course, once America started to have Disney World and all those other things, people began to travel abroad, and when they came home to the rides that we provided, they thought it was not quite like that. They have had a very tough time.

Having seen the APPG wither away, it is marvellous that we now have strong voices from two parts of Glasgow, South Shields, Norfolk and Gloucester here—the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden), for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), and my hon. Friends the Members for North West Norfolk (James Wild) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham)—as well as my new colleague from the north of England, my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell). I am very heartened that things are going to change. Let us be frank with each other. If we want to get things done, Members of Parliament need to lobby Ministers—it does not matter who the Government are. If the Government of the day think that there are not too many Members of Parliament interested in this subject, they just shrug their shoulders and it does not count. I am hoping that our numbers will grow and grow and we will become the powerful force that we used to be.

I agree with all the comments made by my hon. Friends and Opposition Members. I am simply probably going to repeat them. The community of shows and travelling fairs is a large one, with more than 25,000 showmen in the UK. Many of those businesses, as we have heard already, are run by families who have followed the way of life for many generations and contributed to the economy and community life.

During the pandemic, many showmen have given up their time and effort to become keyworkers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester said, delivering food to supermarkets and vulnerable communities alike. Showmen have also wonderfully donated to NHS staff and hospitals all over the country, on top of their regular charitable work, which has raised significant sums of money for national and local charities.

The effects of the coronavirus restrictions hit the show and fairs community at the worst time possible. Having spent the winter repairing and maintaining rides, conducting safety checks and obtaining insurance and vehicle licences, they were forced to close down and miss all their peak months of operation, because let us be frank, that is usually Easter, Whitsun, summer and Christmas—as we know, there would have been something going on near Buckingham palace. It really has hit them at the worst time possible.

When businesses were allowed to open from 4 July, if covid-secure, show and fair operators spent thousands of pounds in order to ensure that their customers would be safe. Despite their efforts, as we have heard, councils throughout the country closed down the majority of fairs, although amusement parks and street markets were allowed to continue operating. That just is not right. For goodness' sake, it all happens outside. It is unfair and it happened because there was not a strong enough voice in all parts of the House.

Councils were not given clear, specific guidance on the safety measures that fairs and shows needed to implement, and that led to confusion and the closure of all fairs. Many fairs that have been taking place for hundreds of years were forced to cancel—that is so sad—breaking a vital link to the surrounding community. Clear guidelines should be issued to councils to enable permission to be granted to fairs and shows in all areas of the United Kingdom. Those events, as the hon. Member for South Shields said, are part of the fabric of life in communities, and they bring in visitors to help the local economy, as well as being great fun.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester said, we can all remember the excitement when a fair or circus came to our area as children. We used to get so excited when the fair arrived on Wanstead Flats. Why I got so excited I do not know—but I did. A visit to the funfair was a magical experience, with candyfloss, which of course is bad for the health, toffee apples, which are bad for the teeth, and rides on the helter-skelter, which I could do. As for all the things that go round and round, my wife, not I, used to take the children on those. The carousel was a wonderful thing to behold.

The sights, colours and music were unforgettable, and the day usually ended with a journey home carrying prizes from the shooting gallery or other games. In my day it was a goldfish in a bag and, of course, as I was a child, if I never got the table tennis ball into the goldfish bowl, when the chap was not looking one of my relatives would cheat for me and just plump it into the bowl. Of course, there cannot now be live animals at fairs, and I think people go home with an oversized cuddly toy—which no doubt we put into raffles in our constituencies.

My own children loved to visit Never Never Land in Southend, just by the pier, which was owned and run by my late friend Mike Dolby—although that was not a travelling fair. I thought that the hon. Member for South Shields said that she had the best seaside town. We will argue about that outside the Chamber; but we are going to become a city, so if hers is the best town we shall be the best city. The children used to love the fun and fantasy that was everywhere. We cannot allow future generations to miss out on those wonderful childhood experiences. Why should they not have those fantasies? It is wonderful for children, and everything should be done to preserve travelling fairs and shows, to make new memories for families all over the country.

As has been said, the culture recovery fund that was set up to assist museums, theatres and other cultural centres has not been extended to showmen and fair operators, and I want to know why from my hon. Friend the Minister. As a valued part of our national heritage, surely showmen should be able to apply for assistance and grants to help them survive until restrictions are eased. It seems very unfair that they are being forced to shut down but are not receiving the financial compensation that is available to other cultural sectors. I am not going to shut up until we get help for them.

Finally, I want to make the case for the continued use of red diesel by showmen. The Treasury is currently holding a consultation on the use and taxation of red diesel, with the aim of restricting it to agriculture only. I know the arguments that the Treasury advances on that, but red diesel is vital to the show community. Other forms of energy are not appropriate for running rides or powering caravans. Increasing the taxation on red diesel would put added pressure on to businesses already hard hit by the pandemic. Let us give fairs and showmen a great Christmas by announcing that we will give them more financial support.

2.4 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing the debate.

[Paul Howell]

Fairs and showgrounds have been part of British life for centuries, and year after year showmen bring their families to run fairs in our constituencies and cities. There are around 10 local fairgrounds in the Sedgefield constituency, including Sedgefield, Ferryhill, Thornley, Trimdon and Newton Aycliffe—though I have to say I probably went up to South Shields, to be honest. They entertain all our local families and help our local economy. They are the pinnacle of many civic calendars.

Sadly this year, due to coronavirus, many fairs and showgrounds will not be in our towns and cities this Christmas time. Because of their history and importance in British life, we should do everything that we can to ensure that fairs and showgrounds are financially supported and treated fairly. There are more than 20,000 showmen in the UK. They have been bringing joy to the British public for centuries. Being a showman is a family business. They are a professional community with a long-standing history, which equates to a multi-million pound industry that has been passed down in families for generations.

In my constituency of Sedgefield, I have one such family-run funfair called Turners—a business with over 200 years of history and nine generations of showmen. For the last 167 years, they have been at the Sedgefield show. Their sense of community was evident during the pandemic, when they were unable to operate their own business. Showmen became key workers, with many using their heavy goods vehicle licences to help to supply supermarkets. Others delivered fresh produce to local people. Showmen also donated supplies to NHS staff in hospitals across the country.

The timing of the pandemic, as has been said, was particularly damaging. Travelling fairgrounds spend much of the winter preparing for next year, and because customer safety is their highest priority that involves spending huge amounts of money over the winter period on maintaining rides, conducting safety tests, and so on—it has all been mentioned already. The majority of travelling fairgrounds had just begun operating at the time of the first lockdown, which meant that they were forced to close and missed many of their peak operating times, such as Easter and several bank holidays. The industry missed out on millions of pounds that represent a substantial and necessary part of their annual income.

All through the pandemic, the major scientists in Government have constantly reinforced the importance of being outdoors and doing outdoor activities to help people with their mental health. The Government have recognised the importance of travelling fairgrounds in helping with those issues by making them one of the industries that are allowed, with covid precautions, to operate in all tiers. The Government allowed all businesses to open from 4 July, if they were covid-secure.

Travelling fairgrounds across the country rose to the challenge, with each spending thousands to ensure that they were safe for their customers. That leads me to my main point: there is such inconsistency between local authorities. The Government gave local authorities the power to decide whether fairs could operate, but why would some overrule the experts and restrict fairgrounds from operating on their land—95% of travelling fairgrounds are on local authority land—when theme parks, amusement parks, car boot fairs, markets, playparks and so on can stay open?

In the north-east, since 4 July three fairgrounds have been allowed on council land. In the summer, one took place in Newton Aycliffe, but on private land. Turners did a survey after it had finished, asking the families coming out of the fair whether they would come again and whether they felt safe. Remember, as was said earlier, it is about personal choice. No one has to go to a fair if they do not want to, and do not feel safe. All of the 482 families surveyed said that they felt safe and would come again, with most families thanking the operators for the opportunity to come to some form of normality and entertainment with their children, helping their own mental wellbeing.

As I mentioned, many fairs spent thousands of pounds ensuring that they were covid-secure; yet, like Turners, many were denied by local authorities, which stated that they were not covid-secure even though they had taken all the necessary steps. That is not consistent, and is deeply frustrating for showmen. Across the country, industries such as pubs, amusement parks and markets were allowed to continue operating while travelling fairs were forced by local authorities to close their doors, despite spending thousands to ensure that they were covid-secure.

Some local authorities made their decisions without providing any legitimate reasons. Theme parks were allowed to open while travelling fairgrounds were denied the same opportunity. That is simply unfair. All travelling fairgrounds are asking for is a level playing field—which is usually where they park. In addition, the Government have failed to provide enough specific clear guidance to local authorities on what they need to do to safely reopen.

Before this debate, I was approached by Turners Funfairs as part of the Future 4 Fairgrounds campaign, which has recommended several actions: I hope that the Minister and the Government can take note and consider these recommendations. First, the Government must put an end to the current inconsistency, to ensure that local authorities allow fairgrounds to reopen safely after the industry has spent a huge amount of money on ensuring the safety of its customers. Secondly, the Government should publish clear guidance to prevent local authorities from discriminating against travelling fairgrounds, whether that guidance is about enabling sites to be used or about supporting them financially.

It is vital that we support our fairs and showgrounds. We must support them financially and—equally importantly—ensure that they are treated fairly and can operate across a level playing field. I hope that the Government will consider those recommendations, and step in to end this inconsistency and provide the clear guidance that is needed. As we exit the pandemic, we will need such events to show people that a happier time is returning, and we must act now to ensure that they have a future that we can all enjoy.

2.10 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone.

I thank all the hon. Members who have spoken in the debate; my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who diligently secured the debate; and the all-party parliamentary group on fairs and showgrounds, which works so hard in the background all year round. I also thank the showpeople themselves—those who have

helped in their own local communities through the pandemic, as showpeople have often helped their own local communities—and the members of groups such as Future 4 Fairgrounds, for example Colleen, who I spoke to earlier. She described very well the situation that the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) laid out and the difficulties that many fairgrounds are facing. I recommend that the Minister look at the Future 4 Fairgrounds video on Twitter, which shows very well indeed the situation that fairgrounds face.

This year, we have seen the loss of so many fairs throughout the summer and throughout the covid lockdowns, which goes from the cancellation of very small local events, such as fairs and gala days, to the cancellation of huge events that have a long history and pedigree. In my own constituency, there is the Glasgow Fair on Glasgow Green, which is a chartered fair; its roots date from 1190 and it took its current form as a funfair from the 1900s onwards. Travelling showpeople brought penny geggies and other rides to the people of Glasgow, so that they could enjoy the fair holidays.

There is also the Kirkcaldy Links Market, Europe's longest street fair, which was established in 1304 and runs over the course of six days. However, it was also cancelled as a result of the covid lockdown. Glasgow's Irn-Bru Carnival is held at the Scottish Event Campus in my constituency. Last year, it celebrated its 100th anniversary as a carnival. It is a brilliant event; I remember my dad taking me to it when I was small and I have taken my own kids to it as well. It has all the joys of the funfair rides, but inside in the warm, which, in Glasgow in winter, is really quite important, because nobody wants it to rain on their candyfloss; rain would not do it any good. To have people going in and enjoying the carousels, the gallopers and the bumper cars—it is a really sad thing that we have not been able to enjoy these things through the course of this year.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East mentioned, many of the showpeople in Glasgow live in our constituencies: in my constituency, showpeople live in Bridgeton and Dalmarnock; and showpeople also live throughout the east end, and in Govan and Scotstoun. In addition, showpeople live in the Cuningar Loop, in South Lanarkshire. The families who live on the sites in these areas have been there for generations. We can look through the names of the families who live there and know who is related; there are grandparents and great-grandparents on the same sites as their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, all living very close together. This industry is very much a family industry and it deserves special recognition for that.

What has also been sad this year is not being able to engage with those families at the Scottish Showmen's Guild annual luncheon, which is held in Glasgow every single year. Every year, I would go and meet those families, learn their stories, see who has had new grandchildren, and have a good chat about all the things that they are getting on with in their own areas. So, it has been very difficult this year for all of those people; I know that because I have been in touch with some of them.

As I think all Members have reflected today, this has been a very difficult and a very unusual year, and showpeople in particular have had their main source of income throughout the year taken away from them. They deserve to have financial support to see them

through, because, as the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) mentioned, many showpeople have now gone into debt as a result of this year; some of them through bounce back loans, which they have been able to access. Some of them have had no support; some of them have been able to access the self-employment support scheme; and a smaller number have been able to access schemes such as the furlough scheme. When we consider the issue of loans, we see that it is really a difficult situation. It is not as if the showpeople are going to get that money back; it is not a deferral of income, but a complete loss of a year's income, which is difficult to make back. Unless we all go on twice as many sets of waltzers next year, it is going to be difficult for them to make that money back.

In many cases, their outgoings have not gone away. As Jennyfer Taylor, who wrote to me, pointed out, testing and maintenance of equipment still has to go on to meet the safety requirements and make sure that everything is in good working order: when the fairs come back, they want to be able to start right away. They need to have that certification in place.

Somebody else who was in touch with me raised the issue of asset finance for rides, because some extremely expensive rides have been brought in from other places. The showpeople have loans on them—some are paying thousands of pounds a month on rides that they cannot take out and use. I understand that some asset finance companies have been quite flexible with people, but not all of them. Anything that the Minister can do to encourage asset finance companies to be as generous to showpeople as they can would be welcome.

I have been to the manufacturing units down in Dalmarnock, where they produce and maintain some of the rides. It is incredibly impressive to watch them being built up from bare frames, welded together and electronic devices put on to them to make the rides that we would all recognise. That is testament to those whose engineering skills have been honed through generations of showpeople and passed down through those families. Often the rides themselves have been passed down as well, and people say, "That's so-and-so's gallopers; that's so-and-so's waltzers." They know them very well and would recognise the rides if they saw them at other shows. People understand that the ones they recognise are part of the heritage.

As the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) pointed out, many showpeople have diversified into other areas, such as the hot food vans we see at lots of events. The cancellation of music festivals and other events over the summer has stymied a huge amount of income that people who had diversified into those areas would have got. They may also have found it difficult to get support. It is not just candyfloss, toffee apples and popcorn, but hot food of various types—of great quality—that has not been able to be produced because the events that they service have not been there.

All hon. Members have spoken of the imbalance of funfairs at some fixed sites being able to open. Theme parks that are on a single site have been able to go ahead and continue, whereas travelling showpeople have not. There seems to be a real case of discrimination against travelling showpeople, who move around the country as part of their business and go to different towns and cities to set up their wonderful rides.

[Alison Thewliss]

Despite being covid-compliant, rides have been refused, often at short notice. That is deeply unfair, because showpeople will have invested in taking the rides out and setting them up, ready to go. If there are hot food vans, they will have been buying in the food and the stock to sell, and then losing it at the last minute, with no compensation. We need to do anything we can to make that simpler for people so that they get the assurance of knowing that they are going to get the rides open and that people will come through and enjoy them, buying the food and candyfloss.

I understand that the Scottish section of the Showmen's Guild has worked closely with the Scottish Government to secure access to grants. I thank my colleagues in Scotland for doing that. The Minister must do all he can to make sure there is an equal scheme for those outside Scotland. Often, people who have rides in Scotland will go to the north-east of England with their rides, but people there cannot access the same support. If possible, there needs to be a scheme for England that people can access as well. I pay tribute to the chair of the Scottish section, Alex James Colquhoun, and all his colleagues, for helping to secure this. I know how hard they have worked on behalf of their members to make this happen.

Funfairs have a rich past and are a rich part of our heritage, with a special place in all our hearts. We can feel the warmth from everybody today about the experiences they have had. The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) mentioned that he does not go on the rides; I love going on the rides. I really enjoy it—more than my kids, actually. Any excuse to go on! We yearn for that normality, and yearn to go back to the joy and excitement that funfairs bring. We must support the showpeople, whose skills have been passed through the generations, to get through this time, so that funfairs can go on to have a strong and vibrant future for all of us.

2.19 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to be chaired by you, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing this vital debate on an important matter, as well as colleagues from across the House for their contributions.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East passionately showed his connection to and support for showpeople in his comprehensive speech. I was particularly grateful for his support for showpeople in Belgium, and thank him and the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) for highlighting the importance of red diesel.

I thank the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) for showing his passion for the King's Lynn mart, which, I must admit, I had not heard of before, and for his points about local authorities and the need for support from the coronavirus relief fund, which I will come to. My hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) gave a great exposition of the Ocean Beach Pleasure Park in her constituency, which I look forward to visiting when possible. She also raised the issue of the 3 million excluded, which affects showpeople and those who work in fairs and fairgrounds in particular, as well as the issue of the debts that showpeople have accrued.

The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), as an honorary member of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain, is uniquely qualified to comment on and represent the concerns of showpeople, and I thank him for his speech. The hon. Member for Southend West mentioned the decline of the importance of fairs and fairgrounds to Parliament, and the falling away of the all-party parliamentary group, but I am sure that under his and other Back-Bench Members' leaderships, we can return to the glory days of supporting showpeople. The hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) highlighted the outdoor nature of fairs and fairgrounds, and their benefits for people's wellbeing during the pandemic. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) highlighted the specialist manufacturing sector. I will also mention that, as it is important to this debate.

This year, we have seen the Conservative Administration show disdain for workers' industries across all sectors in the UK. Fairgrounds have been ignored entirely. From the Great British seaside to the commons of our towns and cities, fairgrounds present a unique source of fun to be enjoyed by friends and families alike. Many of us have really fond memories of going to fairs when growing up, particularly in small towns. It was one of our first experiences of being able to go to something independently of our parents, in our early teens. My memories are of going to the Becky fair with my mates and, more recently, of taking my own children to the Leeds Valentine's fair.

Fairgrounds employ thousands of workers nationally, but with more than 90% of events cancelled this year the sector faces unprecedented hardship, even though fairgrounds have made huge efforts to become covid-secure. The fairs are real family businesses, as so many hon. Members have said, with generations of people owning and working on them. Most are represented by the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain, which speaks for nearly all our travelling funfairs.

Richard Graham: The hon. Gentleman is making a good speech, but I say gently to him that it is a bit unkind to say that the Government have done nothing at all for showpeople. The key element to all this is the local council. My council, Gloucester City Council, not only granted the Willie Wilson funfair its usual fair, but actually extended the amount of time it could open, so more people could benefit from it. It is really down to councils, and I hope that both Labour and Conservative councils will respond to our points about supporting showmen.

Alex Sobel: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Local authorities cannot provide the financial support and grants that the Government can, but I will come to the point about the trading aspects of fairs and fairgrounds, which is hugely important, as he said.

I recently met representatives of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain, and the stories that I heard were heartbreaking. As the Minister knows, and as we have shared during the debate, many of those family businesses, which underpin much of our cultural heritage, sit at the heart of communities and often raise huge amounts of money for charity and engage with social initiatives. During covid-19, many showpeople became key workers: many used their heavy goods vehicle licences to help to supply supermarkets across the country, while others

delivered fresh produce to local people who were struggling in lockdown. Some even donated supplies to NHS staff and hospitals across the country.

Swathes of the hospitality sector have spent a great deal of time and resource refactoring their businesses to allow them to provide a safe environment for their patrons during the pandemic. Fairground businesses, as we know, are based outdoors in the open air, and are no different. People across the industry have gone to great lengths in that regard, but while businesses in other sectors have been given priority to operate, they have been stymied and blocked. The Government seem to have totally forgotten about the travelling fairgrounds, or are just passing on responsibility without sufficient guidance and support. Businesses are struggling without adequate support from Government, as the direct cash grants for closed businesses are worth—at most—half what they were during the first lockdown.

Meanwhile, the one-off additional restrictions grant for local areas is inadequate and fails to take into account the circumstances of various restrictions in different places. Operators alone have had access to piecemeal self-employment grants that completely overlook each fairground's numerous additional workers. In my neighbouring constituency of Leeds Central, the Valentine's fair employs more than 700 people. None has received any financial support or reassurance that they can return to work next year.

The industry has been denied access to the closed local restrictions support grant, and does not appear to be receiving funding from the open discretionary local restrictions support grant—in any case, those grants will be worth at most half. Fairgrounds also do not seem to be in receipt of support from the additional restrictions grant, which, again, is flawed in its design, failing to take into account the circumstances of various restrictions. Grants from those imperfect schemes would still be better than nothing to the fairground sector, which desperately wants to be able to protect jobs, protect the industry, and offer much needed support to both employers and employees, many of whom operate without rateable premises and often as sole traders. The winter months are a period of preparation for the new year in the fairground industry. With no clear plan for their return and no financial support, operators have been left mired in uncertainty. Many find themselves unable to even pay for services missed during peak times of operation.

The Government gave local authorities the power to close travelling fairgrounds while retaining power over theme parks, which are allowed to open while travelling fairgrounds are denied the same opportunity. The Government need to create a level playing field and take a stronger hand with local authorities, as the hon. Member for Gloucester intervened on me to say.

The fairground sector was already facing significant hurdles before the additional complications caused by covid-19. Travel ambiguity and rising costs, a direct result of Brexit, add additional unnecessary strain. Those factors, alongside the squeeze and the pandemic, have left many on the brink.

When I met the Showmen's Guild, it noted that 40% of members have reported rising insurance fees. Last year alone, one ride saw an insurance cost rise from £177 to £532, which is another issue that the Minister needs to address. He also needs to consider the supply

chain. Many manufacturing businesses with a unique set of skills, which the hon. Member for Glasgow Central raised, are worth £200 million to the national economy.

On support elsewhere in the UK, the Scottish Government have issued £1.5 million to Scottish showmen to compensate for their loss of income, which was mentioned by the hon. Members for Glasgow Central and for Glasgow East. The devolved Administrations in Northern Ireland and Wales are likewise offering specific tailored support. The industry is really struggling. The Minister knows that nearly a quarter of the cultural recovery fund is yet to be allocated, but travelling fairgrounds are currently excluded. Could they now be included, even at this late stage? I want to hear the Minister's views on that.

Who could deny that fairs and fairgrounds are a part of our nation's cultural heritage? Even Simon and Garfunkel knew of Scarborough fair, although it ceased to exist 200 years before they penned their classic song. I hope the Minister has urgent solutions, or it might be only in song that people know of our great fairs and travelling fairgrounds in future.

2.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to respond on behalf of the Government to this important debate, which comes at the end of a hugely challenging year for the fairground and showmen's sector. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing this debate. I know he has spoken regularly on behalf of the sector throughout this period. I thank all Members from across the House for their contributions today and for their involvement in the APPG. I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) called for more Members to join.

[CHRISTINA REES *in the Chair*]

Many Members have sent me written questions and so on over the past few weeks, and I appreciate their doing so. The interest in the issue in this Chamber is a clear demonstration of how important fairs and showground events are both to the UK economy and to our cultural heritage. It is an indication of the importance of the community of showmen, their identity and their contribution to life in the UK. As the hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned, their contribution, for example, to charities and to their local communities during this crisis has not gone without notice.

Although the tourism and cultural issues are generally devolved matters—the devolved Administrations are responsible for any targeted financial support in their respective nations—I am on good terms and consult frequently with my devolved counterparts. I meet them regularly and will continue to do so. We learn from each other.

Outdoor events, broadly defined, make a huge and valuable contribution to our tourism industry. According to the Events Industry Forum, they generate £30 billion a year and employ directly over 500,000 people in the UK, with people having made around 140 million visits to our outdoor events of all kinds in 2018. As was mentioned, and as the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain

[Nigel Huddleston]

itself suggests, the fairground industry specifically generates more than £100 million in gross value added per year. That cannot be sniffed at.

The absence of such events for much of this year has shown how funfairs and showgrounds support many of our social celebrations, be they summer or winter festivals, or longstanding and much-loved local events, as was mentioned. The past nine months of the covid-19 pandemic have been an extreme challenge for all sectors and businesses. Showmen are no exception to that. We recognise the widespread impact that covid-19 has had not only on the successful operation of those businesses, but on the whole community and families who keep funfairs and fairgrounds going.

I would like to set out some of the support offered by the Government to date and then look to the future. In March, the first lockdown hit the visitor economy hard. It wiped out our usually bustling outdoor events calendar, marking a period of immense hardship for many events businesses and their families. However, the Government acted quickly to help businesses through that period with an unprecedented package of support, including self-employment schemes, as well as a variety of grants and loan schemes, as was acknowledged by colleagues today, although I recognise that not everyone in every sector is always eligible for all of them.

Where specific issues were identified, we acted by securing additional money to be spent by local authorities aimed at helping many tourism and events businesses, including some that were outside the business rates system. Although I know there have been points where eligibility has not been possible, showmen have seen some success in applying for bounce-back loans, small business rate grants, local council discretionary grants and the self-employment support scheme. As I said, I recognise that that financial assistance has often been offered to operators and that the nature of the sector means that there remains a significant financial impact on the wider showmen community across all sectors, which has not received all the support. I urge showmen and fairground operators to continue to apply for all the available support, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) pointed out. I encourage them to apply for those grants that are available.

Throughout the summer, when restrictions were gradually eased, we helped fairs to make the most of the season. We cut the VAT rate on tourism, hospitality and leisure-related activities, including admissions to fairs, from 20% to 5%. We launched a variety of campaigns to try to encourage people to be out and about, including the Enjoy Summer Safely and the Escape the Everyday campaigns. We worked with the sector to develop detailed guidelines to make outdoor events covid-secure. As many hon. Members mentioned, becoming covid-compliant to provide security to visitors and workers in this sector has not come without significant cost and effort; I recognise that. VisitBritain introduced the “We’re Good to Go” standard, which over 40,000 businesses have signed up for, including many funfairs.

As hon. Members know, covid-19 forced us to adapt our approach in the autumn and strengthen social restrictions once again. I know that these restrictions have placed further strain on fairs and showground operators. However, I want to point out the measures

introduced by the Government to mitigate some of those pressures. In response to November’s national lockdown and ongoing local measures, the Chancellor implemented further support for businesses and individuals, including extending various Government-backed loans, extending the furlough and self-employment schemes and introducing new grants.

I want to draw attention to those grants, which may be relevant to several businesses—not all, I recognise—in the fairground and showground sector and its supply chains. First, businesses that were legally required to close due to the restrictions, as was the case for funfairs during November, can receive up to £3,000 for the month. Secondly, many eligible businesses in the hospitality, leisure and accommodation sectors that were not required to close but suffered reduced demand could receive grants of up to £2,100. While the Government have set suggested criteria for the funding that states that we expect it to be

“targeted at hospitality and leisure businesses”,

local authorities will determine local needs for supporting the recovery, and they will determine exactly which businesses to support through the grants. However, I strongly encourage them to consider applications from the fair and showground sector sympathetically. That clear message, repeated by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, is the one we need to send today.

Finally, we have given local authorities £1.1 billion through the additional restrictions grants to help business more broadly. Again, they can determine how much funding to provide to businesses through the scheme and which businesses to target. Guidance for ARG funding again encourages local authorities to

“develop discretionary grant schemes to help those businesses which—while not legally forced to close—are nonetheless severely impacted by the restrictions put in place”.

That includes

“businesses which supply the retail, hospitality, and leisure sectors, or businesses in the events sector”.

While decisions are at the discretion of local authorities, I encourage them to make funding available to the fairs and showgrounds sector and I encourage showmen to apply for the funding—again, that has been the consistent message from the debate. We will continue to work with the Showmen’s Guild to understand covid’s impact on travelling showmen and closely monitor the fairground industry’s access to these grant schemes.

It is important to keep in mind that any further support will need to be considered in the wider context of existing support for the wider tourism and events industry and the effectiveness of measures already in place. Of course, with the exception of periods of national lockdown, funfairs and fairgrounds have been permitted to operate since July and, far from ignoring the fairground and outdoors events sector, we prioritised it for reopening. Local authorities are responsible for permitting events in their local areas.

The Government have set out a broad framework in which funfairs and fairgrounds can go ahead if they follow covid-secure guidance, adhere to all the legal requirements and put in place every mitigation to ensure that their events do not pose a public health risk. My Department has produced advice for local authorities encouraging them to work closely with event organisers on a case-by-case basis to permit events to go ahead safely. It is also important to stress that we recognise the

important role of local authorities. Even if an event has taken place in the past, it is not necessarily appropriate for it to take place at the same location currently or in the future—there may be pinch points, for example. A directive from the Government saying that such events must go ahead would therefore be inappropriate, because we must recognise the local authority's role in identifying the particular local circumstances. As I said, pinch points or other perfectly reasonable considerations may mean that events should not go ahead.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I notice that the Minister is coming to the end of his comments. He said he recognises that not everybody can get support, so the crux of the debate is: what will he do to ensure that those who cannot get support do get it?

Nigel Huddleston: I will come to a couple of points. As I have said, the most important thing is that discretionary grants are available and that local authorities should look at this sector sympathetically.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: If that is the case, will he ensure that local authorities get more money? I know a lot of local authorities are running out of the money that the Government have already given them.

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Lady will know that, for example, the discretionary grant fund is £1.1 billion, and it was specifically suggested that that money should go to events and locations and businesses that perhaps have not been paying business rates—particularly those who do not have a permanent location—and again specifically to the hospitality, leisure and events sector. That is clear guidance to local authorities. As I have said, other guidance is available.

The guild has shown that where entities have been able to apply for grants, they have had success. I do recognise that that is not across the board, but it is simply not true to say there has been no support. There has been significant support. I encourage all entities to apply and I encourage those disbursing the money, and those at local authority level in particular, to look sympathetically at those applications.

Richard Graham: The Minister is making a good point. To be fair, I think that the money is there, but what would be very helpful is if he could team up with his MHCLG colleagues to send a clear message to council chief executives and leaders that they should give real consideration to the needs of the local showmen and, if need be, find a councillor in touch with them to co-ordinate a needling so that the needs are understood specifically.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for his practical comments. I am happy to write again to MHCLG. The message is clear in the guidance. As far as I am concerned, those are exactly the kind of entities that should be receiving support and what the programme was designed for. I am happy to write again, but there is a record of where some have received the money. That in itself shows that they can and should be eligible.

Alex Sobel: One point made by several Members in the Chamber, including the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), but not addressed by the

Minister is that the CRF funding is in his own Department. Will the criteria be extended to allow showpeople to apply for that funding?

Nigel Huddleston: I shall be coming on to that in a moment.

Where events have been permitted, there are numerous examples of safe, successful events going ahead, such as Blackheath's August bank holiday funfair, the Tuckers fair at Birstall, near Leeds, the Charles Cole fair in Southampton and the Winter Festivals at Lakeside, Bluewater and Brent Cross. In my constituency, the local authorities have allowed fairs and other events, and have worked with organisers to ensure that those events are safe. I have seen a good relationship at first hand.

I therefore encourage and expect local authorities to allow fairs and other events to go ahead unless there are health risks that cannot be mitigated. I will repeat that, because this is a really important message: I encourage and expect local authorities to allow fairs and other events to go ahead unless there are health risks that cannot be mitigated. As well as providing vital income for showmen, such events have of course given local communities a much-needed sense of normality while putting in place appropriate mitigations to keep visitors safe.

With regard to the point that the hon. Member for Glasgow East made about local authorities cancelling 2021 fairs, we cannot guarantee what next year will hold, or exactly when covid restrictions will be lifted, but I share his belief that 2021 offers us all at least a glimmer of hope for a return to normality. Decisions about permitting local events are at the discretion of local authorities.

As set out in our guidance, I urge local authorities around the country to consider applications from outdoor event organisers on a case-by-case basis, according to the health situation in the area at the time, and not to issue blanket bans on future events without due regard for the safety measures that we know that such events can implement and put in place. My Department and the MHCLG will continue to engage with Public Health England, local authorities and fairgrounds themselves as part of the continuing reopening process.

Several hon. Members raised the issue of the red diesel duty. At Budget 2020, the Chancellor announced that the Government will remove the entitlement to use red diesel from April 2022, except in agriculture, fishing, farming, rail and non-commercial heating, including domestic heating. The Government recognise that that will be a significant change. Ultimately, this is a matter for the Treasury, which had a consultation, as has been recognised. That consultation, I believe, has now closed and the Treasury will set out the next steps in due course once it has considered the responses to the consultation in detail. I am afraid I cannot say much more at this moment in time.

Alison Thewliss: I appreciate what the Minister says about not being able to comment on the red diesel point, but my understanding is that some European cities have plug-in points, so that funfair operators do not even need to use diesel in city centres and so on—they can use electronic charging points for their vehicles and rides. Could he support the development of that kind of thing?

Nigel Huddleston: We are always open to good and creative ideas. We can look at what our friends in Europe propose to see whether we can mirror or copy anything.

With regard to the culture recovery fund, as with any fund, there are always eligibility criteria and a restriction on it. One thing we have been trying to do—I repeat this—is to get fairs and the outdoor events sector open as soon as possible. In fact, we prioritised it. Therefore, they are able to be open, although I recognise—as we have all said today—that there are restrictions on that. The classification of what is eligible, particularly for the part of the culture recovery fund overseen by Arts Council England, included certain sub-genres. For example, circuses are a sub-genre of theatres in the Arts Council England classification. They were included, as well as areas where there is more of a live entertainment element and more often seating than in other areas.

There was a set of criteria. Most entities that received money from the CRF were unable to open when other entities were, so there had to be a broad set of criteria and eligibility in place. I recognise that not every entity that would like to apply is eligible or able to do so, but as I said, financial support and schemes are available. Although not everybody is eligible, I encourage everybody in the sector to apply if they think they may be, rather than discount themselves by not applying.

We will continue to engage with the funfairs and outdoors events stakeholders as we look into how to support them most effectively as they recover, including through the development of a tourism recovery plan, which I and my Department are overseeing. We know that there is plenty of work ahead of us, both in terms of reopening and the overall recovery, and I am grateful for all the constructive ideas that hon. Members have put forward today. I assure hon. Members that the Government are listening, and we will continue to work with all stakeholders on ideas to further support the fairs and showground industry.

2.46 pm

David Linden: It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Chair, Ms Rees. I pass on my thanks to the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) for chairing the first part of the debate. I wish him and you a merry Christmas. We have had an excellent debate. It was never my intention for it to be combative, so I am genuinely delighted with how it has gone and with some of the things that the Minister has said.

I will sum up some of what hon. Members said in what was an excellent debate. The hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) rightly paid tribute to his constituent Colleen Roper, who I have had dealings with for several months. She is tenacious in raising the issue, so he was right to put that on the record. He captured the history by talking about the royal charter established under Henry VIII for the King's Lynn Mart. That is impressive and will not have been lost on the Minister.

In my experience, the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) is not someone to be wrestled with often, as the Minister probably found several times. She rightly talked about the 3 million people who have been excluded, which is an indisputable fact. She quoted the ladies from Future 4 Fairgrounds, who said that it is not just a job for people, but a way of life. That is what I

mean when I say that from my flat in Glasgow, I look into the yards where these people live, and I look at their caravans and equipment alongside them. It is a way of life for them and it is important for the Government to reflect on that.

I am jealous of the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) as an honorary member of the Showmen's Guild. He made an incredibly informed speech. I pay tribute to his work with the coalition Government on education. I was not unaware of that; I was looking at it only this week. I thank him for putting many of those points on the record. He spoke with a lot of authority on the issue.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), which should be, I believe, a city—we cannot get through a debate without putting that on the record—for his leadership of the APPG. It is probably quite frustrating when a young whippersnapper such as me comes along and starts prodding people to do lots of stuff, but he has a long track record of leading on these issues, and it is a pleasure to serve under his chairmanship of that group. There was a bit of a debate, in which I was certainly never going to get involved, between him and the hon. Member for South Shields. I think we can agree that the hon. Gentleman has the best seaside city resort and the hon. Lady has the best town. Perhaps we can leave it there without having a diplomatic incident.

For the purposes of *Hansard*, which I am sure will have got that wrong, the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) was not at all suggesting that the best funfairs were in South Shields; I am sure he meant Sedgefield. He was right to talk about the nine generations that have operated over 200 years. I made precisely that point in my earlier speech about people's long historical connection.

As Glasgow politicians, there is always a bit of banter between me and my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). We might disagree about who has the best constituency, but we do not disagree that the Irn-Bru Carnival at the Scottish Event Campus is much missed this year. We look forward to it coming back. She is right to put on the record some of the issues relating to asset finance. I and several hon. Friends from Scotland wrote to the asset finance companies back in March, and some have been helpful, in terms of being a bit more flexible. She is also right to talk about the impact of the way the Showmen's Guild was set up in regions, and to put on the record the concerns of showmen, particularly in the north of England, who are missing out on the funding and will be looking to their colleagues north of the border.

The shadow Minister was right to press the issue of the culture recovery fund. Earlier in the year, I was a bit concerned about the fact that when the taskforce was undertaken, the Showmen's Guild was told that it could not be part of it and had to be represented by the Association of Circus Proprietors of Great Britain. That is akin to asking the Brownies to represent the Scouts. That did not go down well with the guild, so is there any way of ensuring that the culture recovery fund can be looked at?

The Minister has been pretty candid today, which was welcome, in acknowledging that some people have been excluded. If there is that acknowledgement, the logical follow-through is to adapt ever so slightly—we are not talking about huge numbers of people—who is eligible for the culture recovery fund.

I thank the Minister, because I genuinely appreciate his tone and the contact that I had with his officials in the run-up to this debate, and I look forward to the meeting that is forthcoming following the question to the Prime Minister. The Government and particularly the Chancellor of the Exchequer do not shy away from a photo opportunity. The Minister should tell Rishi that being pictured on the teacups is pretty good—it probably trumps that Nando's shot. The Minister would be welcome to join us on the teacups as well, of course. Any support that the Treasury could look at providing, particularly as we head towards the Budget in March, would be appreciated.

I am very grateful to the Minister for putting on the record quite so strongly his expectation that local authorities should not be cancelling fairs. I expect that this edition of *Hansard* will be going to just about every council officer from the Showmen's Guild, so I welcome that.

The final thing that I want to talk about is diesel. I appreciate that that is not a matter for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, but could a formal representation go from the Minister to the Treasury to say that he has heard those concerns?

Nigel Huddleston *indicated assent.*

David Linden: The Minister is nodding ever so slightly, so he is acceding to that request. If a letter could go to the Treasury outlining that, as the consultation has closed, that would be very helpful.

I want to take the opportunity to wish you, Ms Rees, and all hon. Members here a very happy Christmas. I am sure we are all looking forward to going on the teacups with Rishi when he gets his wallet out.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of fairs and showgrounds.

2.52 pm

Sitting suspended.

UK Hydrogen Economy

3 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK hydrogen economy.

I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Members will be aware that only three weeks ago, I sponsored the UK Parliament's very first stand-alone debate on hydrogen, which was about hydrogen transport. I believe that it was a great success and I welcome the Minister's proactive and helpful response. It is incredibly exciting that straight off the back of that debate, I have the opportunity to broaden the scope of the conversation today to encompass the UK's hydrogen economy. It is right that I should touch on hydrogen transport, but I am keen to emphasise hydrogen's important role in home heating, the gas network and industry, and its wider economic benefits for the UK.

I have been clear that we need a multifaceted approach to decarbonising our economy and meeting our net zero goal. One technology alone will simply not be enough. Instead, we must move to a model where we use the best renewable fuel or technology for the job at hand. By advocating for our hydrogen future, I am in no way detracting from electric vehicles, biofuels or carbon capture and storage, among other central aspects of the matter. I believe that those must be used in conjunction with hydrogen to ensure that we do not have any gaps or holes in our decarbonisation efforts. Hydrogen, however, presents a unique opportunity for us to corner the market and become a world leader in hydrogen use and production, in a way that we simply do not with electric vehicle batteries or in the wind farm supply chain.

The UK is the perfect place to be a hydrogen power, because of expertise, home-grown companies, North sea assets and our developed infrastructure. Our wind farms provide clean renewable energy to produce hydrogen, and underwater pipelines can in theory ferry that hydrogen to and from the continent. I have reiterated time and again that a strong UK hydrogen industry will create thousands of jobs across the country, cut our carbon emissions dramatically and boost our post-covid and post-Brexit economy.

In my speech on hydrogen transport a few weeks ago, I spoke at length about the flexibility and freedom offered by hydrogen fuel cell electric vehicles, which are practically free of CO₂ emissions. Energy is stored as compressed hydrogen fuel in hydrogen vehicles, which means that they can drive up to 700 km without refuelling, and just like a conventional car they take only a few minutes to refuel. The deployment of hydrogen is likely in vehicles that travel long distances or that have high utilisation, such as buses and heavy goods vehicles: those are less suited to electrification, and the consumers demand rapid refuelling.

I am particularly impressed by Wrightbus, which is building 3,000 hydrogen buses in the UK for use across the country by 2024—the equivalent of taking 107,000 cars off the road. I have highlighted that if the 4,000 zero-emission buses announced in February had been hydrogen buses, the economies of scale would have revolutionised the transport sector, helping to achieve cost parity between hydrogen and diesel buses. We need that to happen as soon as possible.

[Alexander Stafford]

A major step in achieving cost parity would be the reform of the renewable transport fuel obligation. I have written to the Government this week to stress the need to reform the RTFO so that electricity from any renewable resource can be considered eligible. I intend that that increased hydrogen production will encourage more councils to buy hydrogen buses and boost UK manufacturing, and that the resulting stable hydrogen supply will speed up the process of cutting carbon from heavy transport sectors.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman rightly indicates that we should encourage the purchase of British vehicles. Should not the Department for Transport now, particularly as it will be free of supposed EU regulations after 1 January, prescribe that the moneys it provides for more environmentally-friendly vehicles ensure they are built in the UK, and not in China or elsewhere?

Alexander Stafford: I agree that we should always buy British and build British where we can. That is why I am excited about hydrogen. It presents so many opportunities for seats such as mine to create jobs and upskill our manufacturing sector.

John Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alexander Stafford: Very briefly.

John Spellar: We have a long while. Quite simply, should there not be real pressure, and a commitment from the Minister, that that is what the Department for Transport must—not should—do? It must commit to doing that.

Alexander Stafford: I welcome that follow-up. I always say that we should, where we can, buy British and buy the best, but one of the benefits of leaving the European Union is that we can have our pick and choice of the world. I want the best to be built in Britain.

Let us turn back to the RTFO, which I know the Minister is terribly interested to hear about. A reformed RTFO will prevent taxpayers' money from going to battery manufacturers in the People's Republic of China. Such a simple amendment could ensure that we incentivise the manufacture of hydrogen buses by British firms, and establish ourselves as a major player in the sector. I am sure that that allays some of the concerns of the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar).

Hydrogen holds much promise beyond buses and HGVs, with important developments in the rail, shipping and aviation sectors. Only this week, I met virtually with the team at Hybrid Air Vehicles, a wonderful British company that is looking to revolutionise short-haul regional air travel, direct city-to-city connectivity and air tourism by way of building a practical and economical hydrogen plane. They have a working prototype and, if all goes well, will be the first to be issued Civil Aviation Authority approval post-Brexit.

Hybrid Air Vehicles is not the only British-based company in this space. ZeroAvia, a UK-US enterprise, has secured £12.3 million of UK Government funding for a certifiable 19-seat market-ready aeroplane capable of flying passengers to the UK from 2023, with letters of intent in place already with operators. That HyFlyer

project is a great leap in realising the Government's net zero ambitions. Only last Saturday, British Airways announced that it was partnering with ZeroAvia to explore how hydrogen can power the future of its fleets. Elsewhere, Aeristech boasts market-leading hydrogen fuel cell compressors, with its 25 kW fuel compressor making it possible to deliver the power output needed for even the heaviest industry vehicles, including in aerospace.

Across the transport sector, the UK is at the forefront of innovation, from large companies to small enterprises. At one end, there is the diminutive but mighty Riversimple Movement, a hydrogen car manufacturer based in Wales, which has ambitions to build up to five small factories around the UK, creating thousands of jobs. We move up to the scale of Johnson Matthey, a British firm that is a global leader in fuel cell development, with its technology ending up in roughly a third of fuel cells globally. If the UK can maintain that advantage, we can steal a march on hydrogen, as China did on batteries.

I have been very active in discussing the hydrogen transport sector, but I am also greatly enthused by hydrogen's potential across the UK economy. Home heating currently accounts for around 23% of national emissions, with the UK well known for having the oldest and least energy efficient homes in Europe. It has become clear to industry, and to parliamentarians, that decarbonising our gas grid is of the utmost importance if we are to meet our net zero target. Hydrogen in the gas grid will play a key role in reducing the cost of the decarbonisation of heat. Its high energy density enables it to be stored cost-effectively at scale, providing system resilience. Furthermore, hydrogen heating can be implemented at minimal disruption to the consumer, and the UK holds world-class advantages in hydrogen production, distribution and application.

Hydrogen behaves in much the same way as natural gas, and is therefore ideally placed to be utilised in existing gas pipe infrastructure. The UK is different from most European countries in terms of the number of properties connected to the gas grid and the readiness of our distribution network. In fact, 85% of homes in the UK are connected to the gas grid. Therefore, repurposing the gas grid to run off green gases has to be a vital part of the solution as we decarbonise our existing buildings.

John Spellar: Will the hon. Member give way?

Alexander Stafford: I will give way very briefly. I know that the right hon. Gentleman is speaking later.

John Spellar: Is there not a problem at the moment that needs to be resolved, which is that hydrogen makes the metal parts of the gas grid more brittle more rapidly? Also, it is easier for hydrogen to escape from them, which is a constraint that we need to address.

Alexander Stafford: Of course, we need to restrain all sorts of leaks in our systems, whether from our gas pipes or our water pipes. I know that there are water pipe leaks as well, and I agree that we will need to upgrade certain elements of pipe. If we want to push at the very start, hydrogen will work very quickly, but of course with all technologies we need to maintain the infrastructure, which I know the Government will do very well.

In the boiler sector, Worcester Bosch and Baxi are leading the way in producing the world's first hydrogen-ready boilers, which can run off either pure hydrogen gas or natural gas, including natural gas blended with up to 20% hydrogen—a mixture that all boilers can utilise, so we are ready to go with that mix. Hydrogen boilers have a distinct advantage over heat pumps, which are another solution, in that they are many thousands of pounds cheaper, costing about the same as a gas boiler. It is estimated that a hydrogen boiler will cost £2,500, whereas a heat pump for a house will cost between £6,000 and £18,000. That is important in terms of fuel poverty, as the cost of heat pumps is potentially unaffordable for some families.

Furthermore, a hydrogen boiler does not take up much space and takes a matter of hours to install. In contrast, an average of three days is needed to fit a large and unwieldy heat pump. It is also worth bearing in mind that the electricity grid has five times less capacity than gas, and relies on gas in the winter to prop it up, making the gas network the obvious choice for resilience purposes.

If there are subsidies for heat pumps, why are there not considerable subsidies for the production of hydrogen? There should be, as that would also help to bolster more jobs. Earlier today, my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) raised with me the need to train up more boiler installers so that we have those skills. The Government should be supporting that.

I am pleased to note that the Government have helped initiate a number of projects that have demonstrated the technical and economic viability of hydrogen as a pathway to decarbonising the gas grid. I have been privileged to learn about many of them since my election, although hon. Members will agree that the preference for similar-sounding names is quite the tongue twister. They include the Hy4Heat programme, the HyDeploy project run by ITM Power, Cadent and the Northern Gas Networks, the H21 project led by the Northern Gas Networks, National Grid's HyNTS Hy Street experiment, and SGN's H100 Fife project.

The Net Zero Teesside and HyNet large-scale projects are crucial to stimulate the mass production of hydrogen so that we can move from theory to reality when it comes to home heating. Those projects are a firm demonstration of the Government's interest in and commitment to hydrogen as a technology to help us achieve net zero. They have also provided evidence of the technical and economic viability of hydrogen as a pathway to low-carbon heat, and have helped us address some of the inherent challenges of rolling out technology. In addition, the geographical spread of the projects across the United Kingdom—many are in left-behind areas—shows that hydrogen can play an important part in the Government's levelling-up agenda.

The success of those projects shows that the distribution, transmission and production of hydrogen must be a priority for the UK. However, the UK is at risk of being overtaken by other countries that have more aggressive and developed approaches to hydrogen. For example, Germany has earmarked €9 billion for the expansion of hydrogen capacity, targeting 5 GW by 2030 and a further 5 GW by 2040. Japan established its hydrogen strategy in 2017, which has given industry the confidence to invest.

To date, the UK has lacked the clear policy framework that exists in Japan, and Government investment has been lower than in countries such as Germany. That is precisely why the Prime Minister's 10-point plan was so welcome, and why the forthcoming hydrogen strategy must be ambitious, wide-reaching and published as soon as possible.

Having addressed hydrogen transport and home heating, I now turn to hydrogen's potential for use in industry. That is of great importance to constituencies in the former red wall such as mine, Rother Valley. Traditionally, my area has relied on energy-intensive industrial processes. Sheffield is, of course, famous for steel making. It is vital that we decarbonise our industry and provide our factories with renewable energy that is powerful, in ready supply and affordable. Rother Valley bore the brunt of British coal's lost competitiveness compared with cheaper foreign imports, and the high cost of energy and the struggling industry has been the narrative ever since. We now have a chance to ensure energy sustainability for generations. In doing so, we will turbocharge our national industries in the post-Brexit world.

In the light of that, I warmly welcome National Grid's ambitions to build a hydrogen transmission backbone consisting of pipelines connecting major industrial hubs across the UK. Such hubs exist in Humberside, Teesside, south Wales, Grangemouth in Scotland, Merseyside and the Isle of Grain in Kent. The concept is that significant volumes of hydrogen will enable the build-out of 100% hydrogen pipelines to decarbonise early adopters in industry and transport. Cadent is planning a similar idea of piping 100% hydrogen by Pilkington's glassworks in Ellesmere Port so that the factory can reduce its costs and stay open to save jobs.

Members will know that I am always keen to focus on my region of Yorkshire and the Humber in this House, which is why Zero Carbon Humber is of such relevance to me and to industry in and around my constituency. Humberside is currently the UK's largest carbon emitting industrial area, but Zero Carbon Humber aims to make it the world's first net zero carbon industrial cluster. It is a wonderful example of the Government working hand in hand with the private sector to fund an ambitious endeavour. It is a staggering statistic that H2H Saltend in Zero Carbon Humber can produce more than half the Government's planned 1 GW of hydrogen by 2025, and is one of the few places in the world where hydrogen, carbon capture and offshore wind congregate to create a "super place". The towns and villages around Zero Carbon Humber offer opportunities for hydrogen neighbourhood heating trials, essential for decarbonising the heat networks I spoke about earlier.

Around my constituency, steelmaking is a huge carbon emitter, but it is also a huge employer, as it is across the UK. On Humberside, hydrogen can be injected into blast furnaces in the steelmaking process, displacing fossil gasses and producing steam as a by-product rather than carbon dioxide, although any CO₂ is captured and stored. We need that technology in Rother Valley and South Yorkshire to protect our plants and factories and to give British steel the boost it so badly deserves.

I envisage the Zero Carbon Humber project being recreated in Rother Valley, tying in with my plans for a hydrogen valley in my constituency. My hydrogen valley

[Alexander Stafford]

will create high-skilled jobs for my constituents, attract investment and new industries to the area, and decarbonise the towns and cities of South Yorkshire.

ITM has already acted, building the world's largest electrolyser factory on the border of my constituency and expressing its desire to build large hydrogen refuelling stations across our nation. In that vein, the Government must encourage the development of net zero industrial clusters across the UK. That is a crucial way to revitalise left-behind areas, protect and create jobs, decarbonise polluting industry and help our manufacturers adapt, to ensure that they not only avoid closure but thrive in our green future.

I have so far addressed the UK's hydrogen economy by sector, demonstrating that we can use hydrogen to decarbonise transport, the gas network and industry. What are the benefits to the British economy of such a hydrogen economy? The Hydrogen Taskforce believes that hydrogen can add up to £18 billion in gross value added by 2035 and support 75,000 additional jobs in every part of the United Kingdom, many of them in the north of England.

Industry, offshore wind and CO₂ storage assets are currently concentrated in the north, meaning that investment in hydrogen production is likely to create and protect more jobs in areas that have been hit hardest by the covid-19 crisis. The existing pipeline of hydrogen production projects has a strong regional spread and will support the Government's levelling-up agenda. More immediately, the business community has told the Treasury that it has £3 billion of shovel-ready private investment hydrogen projects and is merely awaiting the right policy framework and commitment from the Government.

As the UK looks to bounce back from the covid-19 crisis, investors in hydrogen offer sustainable economic growth opportunities that will kick-start the green recovery. Speeding up hydrogen solutions will allow the UK to build on existing areas of expertise and global leadership. With a value chain that spans production, storage, transmission and distribution, along with downstream appliances, this growing global market can support thousands of jobs in the UK for decades to come.

With the benefits of the UK's hydrogen economy ringing loudly in their ears, the Government must act decisively and boldly, to steal a march on our competitors and cement Britain's place as the hydrogen nation. I have already mentioned the absolute necessity of the prompt publication of the forthcoming hydrogen strategy. In addition to that, I have several policy asks of the Minister.

I will first reiterate my policy asks from my hydrogen transport debate, which, unsurprisingly, are still relevant three weeks later. Those were to set ambitious targets for the mass commercialisation of hydrogen technology; to stimulate supply and demand in parallel, focusing initially on regional clusters; and to ensure relevant Government Departments work collaboratively.

However, this debate has a wider scope, so there are additional specific policy asks. Generally, we must ensure that the upcoming hydrogen strategy sets out a clear road map for how the UK will create the renewable hydrogen it needs. We must institute long-term, stable and predictable policy and regulatory frameworks to

reassure investors. We must ensure that the Government and Ofgem make decisions quickly and decisively. We must support hydrogen innovation by funding research and development. We should support trials of 100% hydrogen. Government industries should now invest and collaborate to ensure that technology, development and commercialisation take place in tandem.

For transport, we must aim for at least some of the 4,000 zero-emission buses to be hydrogen buses. Most importantly, we must reform the RTFO to allow renewable energy from all sources to be eligible. We must introduce changes to the bus service operators grant to stop discrimination in favour of diesel vehicles, and the Department for Transport must build on the University of Birmingham's hydrogen train success, by supporting hydrogen train fleet development. Additionally, we must support the opening of 100 hydrogen refuelling stations by 2025, to support the roll-out of hydrogen transport.

For the gas network and home heating, we must support the roll-out of hydrogen-ready boilers for existing homes by 2025 at the latest; outline in detail how the vision for hydrogen towns can be delivered; set out how the gas grid can be repurposed to enable the safe distribution of hydrogen; enable hydrogen to be blended into the gas network; and ensure that the heat and buildings decarbonisation strategy promotes a technology-neutral approach. We must also provide clarity on the business models that underpin hydrogen—for example, carbon capture and storage, pricing and demand mechanisms.

For industry, we need to lay out specific hydrogen production targets, prioritise the reskilling and upskilling of workers, and ensure that there is early decision making on permissions, business models and the role of regulators. I appreciate that this is a substantial policy list, but I hope the Minister will be able to enlighten me about his plans, both verbally during this debate and in writing at a later date.

As I draw to a close, I reiterate that I believe the hydrogen economy will be transformative for the UK. Not only can it decarbonise across all sectors, ensuring that we achieve our net zero target, but it protects industry and retools it for our green future. The hydrogen economy will create skilled jobs in left-behind areas, such as Rother Valley, revitalising parts of the UK that have suffered the grim effects of deindustrialisation.

We have a unique opportunity to corner the hydrogen market, positioning Britain as the world leader in the production and use of hydrogen. That will not only be a shot in the arm domestically as we recover from the coronavirus pandemic, but it will enable UK plc to export our technology and expertise around the world in a post-Brexit age. The hydrogen economy will improve our energy security and resilience, which are critical in light of both the devastating pandemic and hostile Chinese and Russian relations. However, in order to reap these rich rewards, I urge the Government to act now to avoid losing out, as we did with batteries and the wind farm supply chain. We have first-mover advantage, but other countries are waking up; we must be ahead of them.

In a brave new decade with many unknowns, we do know that decarbonising our economy is important for environmental, economic, security and health reasons. Hydrogen can be one part of our energy solution, used in conjunction with other technologies, if we take action

now to ensure that the UK's hydrogen economy works for everyone, and we confirm our place as the hydrogen kingdom.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Mr Stafford, could you please provide specific details of your declaration of interests for the record?

Alexander Stafford: Of course. It is in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Until my election to this House in the general election in December last year, I worked for Shell, and Shell has worked on hydrogen; I personally did not work on hydrogen there, but I did work for Shell.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Thank you.

I do not think there is any need to impose a formal time limit, but if you each speak for about seven minutes, we should be able to get everyone in comfortably.

3.23 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship today, Ms Rees.

I start by thanking the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) for securing this debate on an issue that is extremely important to so many areas across the United Kingdom, including my own constituency. Drawing on his own expertise in the sector, he spoke in great detail and outlined many of the issues that will be of the utmost importance for the hydrogen strategy. I thank him for that and for his dedication in raising these issues in what is his second debate in the House of Commons.

To reach the Government's goal of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 and to honour the Scottish Government's commitment to achieve the same goal by 2045, we will need to maximise the use of all potential options for decarbonisation. Until this point, hydrogen has been a massively underused option, but it is one that should be prioritised in Government planning and funding in the future. In particular, we need to be aware of the fact that, while electric cars, wind turbines and solar panels are widely accepted by the public—and their imaginations—right across the United Kingdom, the concept of hydrogen as a potential low-carbon secondary energy source is still alien to most of them. Therefore, I first urge the Minister to consider what steps the Government can take to maximise public understanding of hydrogen as a vital asset in combating climate change.

[*SIQBHAIN McDONAGH in the Chair*]

I welcome the Government's White Paper, which outlined their aim to increase the UK's low-carbon hydrogen production capacity to 5 GW by 2030 and committed them to publishing a more detailed report in 2021 focusing on the UK's hydrogen strategy. I urge them to publish the report without delay. Hydrogen is one of the key concepts of the future that will take us towards our climate goals.

When the Government publish their strategy, the projects and partnerships already implemented across Scottish businesses and by the Scottish Government may be relevant. I am always a keen advocate of learning from and sharing best practice right across the United Kingdom, and I would highlight in particular the Green

Hydrogen for Scotland partnership between ScottishPower, BOC and ITM Power, and the Aberdeen hydrogen bus network, which introduced the world's first hydrogen-powered double-decker bus earlier this year.

I would also highlight the hydrogen heating pilot scheme to be introduced in 300 homes in Fife by the Scottish Government in 2022. That scheme and the idea of using hydrogen for heating homes have been well documented in the past. It is particularly attractive in constituencies such as my own. East Kilbride was a new town developed just after the second world war, and now contains a significant proportion of ageing and dense housing stock where heating pumps may not always be a viable option.

The Government's White Paper mentions plans for neighbourhood hydrogen heating trials. I press the Government to consider the possibility of new boilers being fitted as hydrogen-ready. Given the industrial age of my constituency and the housing stock I have described, I ask that the Minister consider East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow as one of the pilot sites when the Government consider those options.

Hydrogen fuel cell vehicles must also be viewed as a crucial option in securing a transition towards green carbon-neutral transport. However, Government funding for hydrogen refuelling infrastructure and stations must be prioritised and detailed in the report on the hydrogen strategy that is due to be published.

In my constituency, a study undertaken by ScottishPower Energy Networks concluded that if all the fossil fuel-powered vehicles were changed to battery electric vehicles, a significant upgrade of the electricity grid would be required. It was estimated that that would take five years, cost £10 million and involve a new major substation and the laying of nearly 70 km of new cables. Hydrogen may well offer a cheaper alternative to electrifying every vehicle on our roads. It has the potential to be rolled out with significantly less disruption to transport networks in coming years and is ideally suited to many parts of the United Kingdom—particularly many of the rural areas of my constituency and across Scotland. Far more research is needed, and ring-fenced funding must also be allocated, if we are to see hydrogen playing a pivotal role in the transition to renewable and low-carbon energy.

Hydrogen also presents tangible opportunities for sustained future employment in my constituency and across Scotland. For example, TÜV SÜD National Engineering Laboratory, located in East Kilbride, is the UK's designated institute for flow measurement and is part of the UK's national measurement system, which is already funded by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The measurement traceability it provides underpins every fiscal and financial transaction that occurs in the UK for liquid or gaseous fuel, traded on readings from flow meters. I have been out to visit, and although I cannot assure the Minister that I understood absolutely all the scientific information that was imparted to me, I certainly tried my best.

The laboratory has been transitioning jobs from oil and gas to the hydrogen sector already and has been working to establish national facilities that will be world-beating. These will provide measurement traceability that allows hydrogen and carbon dioxide for carbon capture and storage to be traded accurately, which I understand is of the utmost importance. Would the Minister, or

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

another Minister from BEIS, be willing to meet me and representatives from TÜV SÜD to discuss potential Government support for the proposed clean fuels metrology centre? That would provide the measurement capability for the UK that will be essential in the adoption of hydrogen as a fuel and the energy vector going forward.

3.29 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on securing the debate. While hydrogen is the new kid on the block, and much work needs to be done to advance its use from a technical perspective and to enhance its economic viability, it is becoming increasingly clear that it will be a vital component of the zero-carbon economy.

Hydrogen is highly versatile and can be used in a variety of ways, whether in transport, heat, power generation or energy storage in industry and agriculture. It could also transform local economies all around the UK, bringing new business opportunities and new jobs to areas, many of which have been left behind. There are colleagues taking part in this debate from all around the UK. We are not in competition. The opportunities in our respective constituencies should complement each other. They are part of a jigsaw that covers all four nations, and we need to piece together that jigsaw to benefit all the communities that we represent.

The piece of the jigsaw that I shall concentrate on is Suffolk and Norfolk—including the Waveney constituency—in East Anglia. While we do not possess any significant industrial clusters, there is an opportunity to harness hydrogen across a large geographical area to create a blueprint for how it can be deployed at scale to decarbonise our energy, transport and heating systems and to revolutionise the way in which we do business, thereby bringing prosperity to the region. I shall briefly outline the opportunities available.

There is the opportunity to ensure a smooth transition in the southern North sea oil and gas basin by redeploying infrastructure and expertise built up over five decades to create a leading hydrogen production and carbon capture and storage hub around the Bacton gas terminal in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker). From there, we could connect into the planned European hydrogen backbone, as Bacton already hosts two gas interconnectors. Hydrogen exports could provide new and important revenue streams. With a large cluster of offshore wind farms already operational, being developed or planned off the coast of East Anglia, there is the opportunity to integrate hydrogen production and storage to provide a valuable alternative to curtailing power generation at times of surplus when the wind may be blowing too much.

There is also the opportunity to reduce emissions from large emitters such as the gas-fired power station in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), which could be adapted to take a blended hydrogen fuel. This week, the Government announced their support for the Sizewell C nuclear power station in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey).

Sizewell C has the potential to make huge quantities of green hydrogen using both electricity and heat, which can be used by transport and other industry. Next year, at Sizewell B, EDF plans to install a small hydrogen electrolyser that will fuel clean construction plant, HGVs and buses. The infrastructure for that could be made available to council vehicles and, in due course, other local businesses to run hydrogen-fuelled vehicles.

There is the opportunity to decarbonise portside operations and shipping activities at the east coast ports of Harwich, Felixstowe, Ipswich, Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn. From those ports, one would also seek to decarbonise road and rail freight. To turn to the rail network, the east Suffolk line, which runs from Ipswich to Lowestoft, is a vital link for the Waveney area to the rest of the country, but it does need to be improved with faster journey times. For that, we could use hydrogen-powered trains.

Finally, East Anglia is the breadbasket of the UK. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests due to family farms in Suffolk. There is an exciting opportunity for the region to be an exemplar of low-carbon agriculture, with hydrogen-fuelled tractors and combines, hydrogen-fuelled grain stores and vegetable processing plants, and environmentally friendly poultry rearing and processing facilities.

This is a compelling and exciting vision. What do we need to achieve it? Locally, we need to pull together a wide variety of interests across a large geographical area and many business sectors, so that we can promote the hydrogen economy of the east in a coherent and co-ordinated way. Nationally, Government must provide the framework for the industry to grow. The announcements in the past month are extremely welcome. The Government must now go further.

As we heard, the hydrogen strategy must be published as soon as possible. There must be a public endorsement of hydrogen as a central component in the transition to net zero, supported by a target percentage for hydrogen in the UK's energy rates. There should be a support programme for the manufacture and deployment of UK fuel cell technologies, which matches world-class technology with investors of scale. There should be a move away from promoting competitions between regions and towards funding for well-managed, joined-up and collaborative initiatives. Finally, there should be clarity on the role of the UK's regulatory framework with regard to hydrogen.

Hydrogen provides an incredibly exciting future for Waveney, Suffolk, East Anglia and the whole of the UK. There is a great deal of work to do. From my perspective, it is good to end what has been an awful year on an upbeat and positive note.

3.36 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on securing this debate and his comprehensive introduction.

There was some criticism, slightly reflected in the hon. Gentleman's positive introduction, about the comparison with other countries in terms of investment. My right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), speaking from the Front Bench

earlier in the week, mentioned that. Today, however, I want to be positive about the Government's strategy as it stands. *[Interruption.]* I am being positive to the Minister and supporting him. I will support the issue of financing, particularly because of a point raised by the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), which was eloquently put, about this not being a competition but a jigsaw. I will refer back to that excellent point.

I am here to represent the case for my own region in the north-west and, in particular, Cheshire, which has a historical position in the chemicals industry through the salt mining that took place in mid-Cheshire for many years. In the energy sector, we also had strong nuclear expertise, through Warrington and Capenhurst in my constituency. Energy is part of our region's DNA. There are offshore wind farms, which we share—as well as the ambition to drive forward our own hydrogen project—with north Wales, in the cross-border area represented by the Mersey Dee Alliance. The scheme that we are keen to promote has widespread support across Manchester, Liverpool, Cheshire and north Wales. Our local enterprise partnerships and the North West Business Leadership Team are behind it, as are the local councils.

The exciting opportunities that we have in Cheshire and Warrington will give us the chance to drive forward a new hydrogen economy at pace. Industry is at the forefront of proposals that are deliverable quickly, and which will protect and support high-value employment and can create thousands of green jobs in the local economy. One of the main projects is HyNet, which could start capturing industrial carbon dioxide emissions as early as 2025, if the Government make speedy decisions on the industrial decarbonisation challenge programme.

Hon. Members may be aware that the north-west region has the highest concentration of advanced manufacturing and chemical production in the UK and industry accounts for nearly a quarter of the region's 40 million tonnes of annual CO₂, so if the Minister can drive this forward, he will make a real difference.

As part of the projects that we are proposing, Liverpool Bay gasfield owner ENI has now been licensed to store CO₂ permanently. Detailed design work is already under way on the pipelines needed to connect the Ellesmere Port industrial cluster to the CCUS—carbon capture, usage and storage—facility.

We also have the potential to start producing low-carbon hydrogen at scale by the middle of the decade, subject to the positive decision on HyNet. The Essar refinery complex at Stanlow could ultimately produce 18 TWh per year of low-carbon hydrogen for use to fuel industry and transport and, potentially, to feed into the gas networks in nearby homes. I say again to the Minister and the House: we already have the human infrastructure—the expertise—as well as the physical, in place and ready to go.

John Spellar: Time and again, even when there is the expertise, Whitehall puts new capacity down south, as it did with nuclear. There was considerable nuclear expertise in Cheshire, yet the next development was put down in Oxfordshire. More recently, with vaccine production, Whitehall had a choice between Oxford and the north-east. Once again, it chose Oxford. Must we not change that mindset in Whitehall?

Christian Matheson: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. Slightly off subject, in Cheshire we also have expertise in pharmaceuticals, and lost that to the south-east. We hear about levelling up, and I am sure that he and I will be pressing the Government to match their slogans with reality. I say that with a willingness to work with the Minister.

By the mid-2030s, HyNet could be capturing more than 25 million tonnes of CO₂ per annum, or two and a half times the target that the Government hope to achieve by 2030. Together with our production capability, that makes Cheshire and Warrington, and the wider Mersey region, a prime candidate to be one of the first low-carbon industrial clusters in the UK. There are also wider domestic applications for using the gas network. Hydrogen can be stored as a pressurised gas, ready for use in the pipes. Hon. Members have already referred to that. Cheshire also has the largest UK storage capacity for hydrogen, using the network of salt caverns that I have referred to. They have excellent geological properties and are one of the more cost-effective options, making them a preferred site for development.

My plea to the Minister and hon. Members is not to set up a beauty contest, playing off one region against another, when there is capacity, capability, expertise and desire across the UK. Five clusters are bidding for funding. For them all to get what they want and need, the funding pot, I am informed, would have to be increased by around £20 million to £30 million. The alternative is to exclude one of the clusters from the funding. That is why I mentioned the question of funding at the start.

I welcome what the Government have proposed, but it would not take much of an increase for everyone to get a piece of the action, so that the jigsaw that my friend the hon. Member for Waveney talked about is not missing a piece. We all know how frustrating that can be. This is a great opportunity for all of the UK, and I hope that the Minister will seize it.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Before I call the next Member, I should say that we have three more Back-Bench contributions. If people agree to stick to a limit of between five and six minutes, we will get to the wind-ups in good time.

3.43 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. It is lovely to hear a time limit mentioned when I have a 25-minute talk—I will pull it right down to three or four minutes.

It is a pleasure to follow my near neighbour, the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson). He said a tremendous amount of the things that I was going to say—he must have seen my speech. However, I have learnt that when things are worth saying, say them several times, and I certainly will. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford). He made an excellent opening to this debate, and covered so many points.

To start, may I ask the Minister a question? Has he yet been in a hydrogen car? I suspect that the answer is no. Last week, for the first time, I had the pleasure of test-driving a new hydrogen car. I will let the Chamber into a secret: it was just like driving a normal car, but

[Andy Carter]

with one crucial difference—there were no carbon emissions. That is the real benefit that we will get from investing in and moving forward with hydrogen.

We are quite some way from the mass roll-out of hydrogen vehicles. When we sat in a hydrogen car in Warrington and I said, “Where can we fill up?”, the answer was Rotherham, which is about 200 miles away, or perhaps 100 miles away. By the time someone had driven from Rotherham to Warrington and back, they would not be able to go to many other places without filling up. We have a huge job to do as a nation to get ready for hydrogen, because as yet there is nowhere in the north of England to refuel a vehicle.

Despite that, hydrogen is certainly the future of our long-term energy needs as we head towards net zero. We have a lot of opportunities in Warrington, Cheshire and the wider north-west to drive forward a new hydrogen economy at pace. I say that because, as the hon. Member for City of Chester indicated, energy is in our DNA in Warrington, certainly with nuclear, but with hydrogen development too.

Encouragingly, the industry in Warrington is at the forefront of proposals that are deliverable quickly and that protect and support high-value employment. We could see perhaps 6,000 green jobs in the local economy as a result of investing in hydrogen. Key businesses in my constituency, including Novelis, one of the UK’s largest aluminium recycling plants, and Solvay, a key employer based outside Stockton Heath, have been in touch to invite the Minister to Warrington to see some of the opportunities that hydrogen could present for their sectors.

By 2050, our energy system will look very different from today. One of the most advanced schemes that will contribute to that is HyNet, which could start capturing industrial carbon dioxide emissions as early as 2025—just five years away—if the Government make speedy decisions on the industrial decarbonisation challenge programme, which is my key ask for the Minister today. By the mid-2030s, HyNet could be capturing more than 25 million tonnes of CO₂ per annum, which is two and a half times the national target that the Government hope to achieve by 2030. The north-west can really contribute to that target.

As the hon. Member for City of Chester said, there are wider domestic applications too. I talked earlier about driving a hydrogen vehicle for the first time. I also chair the all-party parliamentary light rail group. We have seen huge developments in hydrogen-powered trams. We have been looking at them in the United Arab Emirates, and I am looking forward to getting on a plane and going out to see them in the not-too-distant future.

For use in the gas network, as has already been mentioned, hydrogen can be stored as pressurised gas ready for use in the pipes. Cheshire has the largest UK storage capacity for hydrogen in the salt caverns, which have excellent geographical and geological properties, and are one of the most cost-effective options, which makes them a preferred site for development.

We could start to produce low-carbon hydrogen at scale by the middle of the next decade at Stanlow, subject to a positive decision on HyNet. Together with our production and storage capacity, that makes Cheshire and Warrington, and the wider Merseyside corridor, a prime candidate to be one of the first low-carbon

industrial clusters in the UK. As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) said, however, it should not be a competition between areas of the UK; it has to be a jigsaw that comes together. Without every part of the UK contributing, we will not see the UK benefiting in the way that it could.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) on his work as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on hydrogen. I hope that he will not mind me saying that in the north-west, we have that deep manufacturing history. The project will play a critical role in our fight against climate change by producing, storing and distributing hydrogen to decarbonise the north of England and north Wales.

In short, HyNet is a game changer that will provide a bedrock to level up across the north-west. It will create about 6,000 permanent highly-skilled green jobs and deliver clean hydrogen energy into our local network to heat our homes. Businesses and investors need to be confident that their investments will deliver a reasonable return for risk, and consumers need to be confident in upgrading their heating systems with potentially costly and disruptive net zero solutions.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) is no longer in her place, but she made an incredibly valuable point: people do not actually understand hydrogen at the moment. I talked to my wife the other evening when we were looking at the hydrogen car and she said, “Well, how does hydrogen work?” She had never really seen it. We have a real challenge in the UK, and as a Government, to convey that message to consumers so that they understand the benefits of hydrogen.

To conclude, I look forward to seeing the UK’s hydrogen strategy in spring 2021, which should set out the UK’s business models and revenue mechanisms, and the Government need to secure the private sector investment that is needed to ensure we can get the most out of hydrogen production as we head towards net zero.

3.50 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on securing the debate and on his considerable enthusiasm and the detail with which he presented it. I think we all agree that hydrogen has considerable potential, but at present that is exactly what it is. I do not mean that in the way that the electricity industry talks about nuclear fusion—nuclear fusion is the future and always will be. I mean it as a call to action, so that we explore the production and utilisation of hydrogen at pace. One benefit of covid has been to demonstrate how, without cutting corners, we can evaluate systems and roll them out. We, particularly Whitehall, need to learn from that.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) slightly chided me to say that we were going off topic, but given the way that the Government work, it is absolutely crucial that we get to the heart of this and change the processes within government, otherwise we will find it very difficult to survive in this future world. Key to this is the civil service’s addiction to process, with extended timescales and time not being a factor. That is true under Governments of all parties. It is enormously important that Parliament relentlessly holds it to account to get things moving.

It could be argued that both Brexit and covid enable and also force the Government to change. That means that we are compressing processes but also, and equally importantly, paralleling them: trying different approaches, seeing what works, and seeing what does not work and shutting that down.

To start with transport, buses and trains are a considerable component of the hydrogen economy and contribute to clean air, particularly in urban areas—by definition—but an important issue is where they are made. Up until now, the Government have been indifferent to where they are manufactured. We have the capacity in Ballymena, Falkirk and Leeds to produce the buses, but what those facilities need, of course, is a market. They need to get on the manufacturing learning curve. The operators need to get the operational experience and find out what the issues and problems are. There needs to be continuing feedback between operators and manufacturers, and that will of course enable us to secure the export markets that have been mentioned.

It might be that, in some conditions, batteries will prove to be better. We need to test that out and assess what will work. We need to learn the lessons that have been mentioned before about where we missed out on batteries and allowed that work to go abroad. We have the largest installation of wind farms in Europe, yet so much is manufactured abroad. Governments, including devolved Administrations, have not focused on that enough.

On domestic heating, nobody mentioned that town gas is composed of a substantial percentage of hydrogen. It might be a much better answer, as was mentioned, than heat pumps for flats and terraced properties, which is a big issue in moving to alternative form of heating.

Also, we need to look at how the production of hydrogen will take place. Let us be realistic. If we are going to roll out the utilisation of hydrogen, some of that initially, but hopefully very shortly, will need to come from hydrocarbon sources. That might be dealt with by carbon capture, but I sometimes think that that is the easy answer that people trot out to deal with that. We need to move much more towards green sources of hydrogen, and we therefore need to look at the institutional barriers. It is truly extraordinary that in the first two months of this year, National Grid paid wind farm operators £72 million to not run their wind farms. That is absurd, and it has been going on for a decade.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that £50 million was also paid out to turn off the nuclear plant? It is not just wind farms.

John Spellar: Indeed. I was not being dismissive of wind farms; I was talking about the institutional barriers. That is not a technical barrier; it is an institutional barrier. It is the same with nuclear. The problem is that in order to qualify for the renewable transport fuel obligation that was mentioned by the hon. Member for Rother Valley, new capacity has to be utilised. We have existing capacity, even though it is not needed. At the same time, we are paying the wind farm or nuclear operators, and that is acting as a barrier to producing cheaper hydrogen. These are the sorts of areas where Ministers, with the support of Parliament, need to be cutting through. We obviously also need to look at the

question of energy storage—hydrogen is an effective form of energy storage—but we need to do a proper evaluation.

I am mindful of the constraints on time. I am slightly concerned about the Government's announcements, because I would like to see a bit more cost accounting. I would like to see a proper analysis of how much each different system is costing. I am not saying that we should not have a subsidy at a certain stage. I would like to see it being a diminishing subsidy, because we have to exercise that rather than all having our pet theories and ideas, important as they are for driving the process. We need to make sure that this is affordable going forward. If we are to compete in an international market, that is where it will really be tested—whether something is affordable or not. I shall yield to the Chair and conclude my remarks.

3.57 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on securing this important debate. Climate breakdown is not a distant threat; it is happening here and now. The World Meteorological Organisation found that the 20 warmest years on record have been in the past 22 years. Human-caused climate change has already been proven to increase the risk of floods and extreme rainfall, heatwaves and wildfires, with dire implications for humans, animals and the environment. It is true to say that without immediate Government intervention, the urgent action required to preserve a habitable planet will be too slow. This will cause unimaginable disruption and could cost millions of lives, most immediately and sharply in global south countries, which have contributed the least to climate change.

The coronavirus crisis has demonstrated that we are only as secure as the most vulnerable among us, and that rapid social and economic change really is possible. At this unprecedented moment, the Government must consider all possible interventions and regulations in order to phase out the extraction of fossil fuels and to transition to renewables as soon as scientifically possible. Hydrogen has a crucial role to play in this endeavour, as well as in providing much-needed jobs as we rebuild from the coronavirus crisis. A report released earlier this month by the Offshore Wind Industry Council suggested that the UK's green hydrogen industry could generate £320 billion for the economy and sustain 120,000 jobs by 2050.

I was proud to be elected on a manifesto that pledged to trial and expand tidal energy and invest to reduce the cost of renewable and low-carbon hydrogen production. Significant amounts of energy are lost in using electricity to produce hydrogen and then in burning hydrogen to produce electricity. The cheapest and therefore most widely used hydrogen is made from reforming fossil fuels, which involves using energy to convert fossil fuels into hydrogen and CO₂. To make the process carbon neutral, that CO₂ must then be removed by carbon capture and storage.

The production of green hydrogen through electrolysis is currently much more expensive. I challenge the Minister and the Government to commit to and focus their investment on making this cleaner form of hydrogen

[Claudia Webbe]

cheaper and more widely accessible. Otherwise, we risk the same fossil fuel companies that have profited from the climate crisis continuing to dominate and possibly even hampering our move towards renewable.

It is particularly vital that we introduce a zero-carbon homes standard for all new homes as part of heat decarbonisation. We must urgently roll out technologies such as heat pumps, solar, hot water and hydrogen and invest in district heat networks, using waste heat—

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. I am terribly sorry that I have to ask the hon. Lady to bring her remarks to a close. I apologise for that.

Claudia Webbe: Okay. The green industrial revolution on which I was elected would have upgraded almost all of the UK's 27 million homes to the highest energy efficiency standards, reducing the average bills by £417 per household per year by 2030 and eliminating fuel poverty. That speaks to the fact that, in any green industrial revolution, it is vital that the protection of all workers and communities is guaranteed during the transition to renewable energies and a socially just economy. The climate crisis is clearly a class crisis and it must be the big polluters and corporate giants who bear the cost, not ordinary people.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution. I do apologise. I call the spokesperson for the SNP.

4.2 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. Like everybody else, I congratulate the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on bringing forward this important debate—his second debate. He has a huge interest in the subject and spoke very well on it. Believe it or not, I agree with pretty much everything he said.

Because of time constraints, I will not pay tribute to everybody who has spoken, except to say that it has been a very good debate. I agree with pretty much all the contributions. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) said it is not a competition, but then made a very valiant plug for East Anglia. Everybody else said that it is not really a competition, but we have to be careful. The way some of the system is set up by the Government at the moment, with picking clusters ahead of others, makes it very much a competition. I would like to see a greater commitment from the Government on taking out carbon emissions, particularly through CCS, and on giving the go-ahead for five or more clusters rather than a couple at a time.

For the most part, when it comes to hydrogen, the UK Government say the right things and have set out some very welcome measures in the White Paper. If the UK and Scotland really are to be world leaders in this technology, it needs more work and greater financial commitment. The reality is that the White Paper was a year and a half late, which has had knock-on consequences for the rest of the policies that follow. The planned production of a hydrogen strategy is obviously welcome but, as the hon. Member for Rother Valley said, we cannot wait any longer. We really need that strategy to come out as soon as possible in 2021.

Germany published its hydrogen strategy in June 2020, so if we do not watch it, the UK is going to be a year behind Germany. As we know, it has committed €9 billion. The £240 million net zero hydrogen fund may be welcome, but over a 10-year period, it looks quite paltry compared with Germany's €9 billion. The UK plan target of 5 GW of low-carbon hydrogen production by 2030 is welcome, but it is the same as Germany's. Could greater ambition be shown, to get ahead of the game?

When it comes to hydrogen business models, the UK Government are again behind the curve. The proposal to finalise those models in 2022 should and could be speeded up. We know the contract for difference process has worked well in bringing down the costs for renewables, although there are issues about the supply chain, but CfD could still be looked at for hydrogen production. Meanwhile, the effort—I am repeating myself on this point—that has gone into plugging nuclear is beyond belief. Let us put that effort into hydrogen and CCS and other low-carbon technologies.

Again, although the UK has made good progress in decarbonisation, 27 million homes are still reliant on fossil fuels for heating, and transport is still a huge contributor. In both those sectors, hydrogen will be pivotal, as has been said. On heating, we still need to see the buildings and heating decarbonisation strategy, and a future homes strategy is required. As the hon. Member for Rother Valley said, we need to look at a whole mix of options for our decarbonisation. Heat pumps, for example, are welcome, but we need a clear strategy and technology selection framework for that to develop and go forward. The way in which those measures will be paid for also needs to be evaluated, because there is a limit to what can be passed on to consumer bills. We already have too much fuel poverty in the UK; we cannot risk any more.

When looking at the 27 million homes that are still reliant on fossil fuel heating systems, and others that are reliant on electrification, it is impossible not to see hydrogen as the only large-scale conversion approach. Even so, the full large-scale roll-out of hydrogen would be in 2030, which means that every week for some 20 years, 27,000 homes will need their heat sources decarbonised. That is a huge task that requires much planning, and perhaps even an independent body to oversee it—like the switch from town gas, it will require a massive effort. Manufacturers in the UK already make hydrogen-compliant boilers, so will the Government mandate the sale and installation of hydrogen-ready boilers by 2025? That is an industry ask.

I welcome the H100 trial in Levenmouth and Fife, where up to 300 homes will be powered by green hydrogen. Interestingly, that project is funded by the Scottish Government and Ofgem, but no money is forthcoming from BEIS as yet. I wish Scottish gas networks well with that trial, and I hope that it will lead to an unlocking of money from and trials by the UK Government.

As has been touched on, hydrogen blending has long been talked about and planned as a way of initially reducing carbon emissions from the domestic heating system. There has been a lack of joined-up thinking on that, however, because, as I hope the Minister knows, the Gas Safety (Management) Regulations 1996 need to be changed to allow that blending to take place. That is a must, but the Government keep holding off on it. The Health and Safety Executive is consulting on that, but

the time that we need for the consultation process, and to decide what to do and whether to change the regulations, could be a barrier to what the industry wants to do.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) mentioned, another facilitating requirement is a robust measuring system to allow the trading of hydrogen. That is a simple but necessary step. Those ideas have been waiting in the National Engineering Laboratory's funding proposals for too long. The proposals ask for £10.5 million for a clean-fuels metrology centre, which could be the world's first, and I have written to the Secretary of State about it. If the Minister could meet or write to my hon. Friend about that, it would be much appreciated.

On transport, hydrogen needs to play a major role in the reduction of shipping and aviation emissions. Again, for joined-up thinking, I urge the UK Government to include those measures in the 2050 net zero target. Those international emissions must be included if we are really serious about net zero. The Scottish Government have included those emissions in their 2045 net zero plans to drive innovation and industry. Other welcome initiatives include the world's first hydrogen-powered crane—I welcome the Department for Transport's £400,000 grant for that—and the setting-up of the Jet Zero Council, as well as the Airbus plans for ZEROe.

Aberdeen has led the way on buses with the introduction of 15 of the world's first hydrogen double-decker buses. The Scottish Government invested £3 million in that project, but another £8.3 million came from the EU. In future, that money must be replaced by the UK Government if we want to roll out more hydrogen buses across the UK. As has been touched on, that is a fantastic manufacturing opportunity for bus companies such as Alexander Dennis and Wrightbus.

Will the UK Government provide a capital subsidy for ultra low emissions vehicles, including hydrogen buses? Will they consider changes to the bus service operators grant to move away from diesel buses? As the hon Member for Rother Valley asked, will any consideration be given to subsidising hydrogen as a fuel to incentivise its use? That could be done through the renewable transport fuel obligation. Again, for a forward-thinking strategy, will the Government set targets for the roll-out of hydrogen HGVs and buses? Those are all sensible measures that would help to create that step-change process.

Finally on transport, it is clear that the maritime sector is also gearing up for change. I welcome the HyDIME project—that is hydrogen diesel injection in a marine environment—that has been supported by £400,000 from Innovate UK for the design, construction and integration of a hydrogen-diesel dual fuel conversion system to take place on a commercial ferry operated between Kirkwall and Shapinsay. The project will unlock the licensing system to allow further projects to follow. Ports across the UK are looking at developing hydrogen as a fuel and the design of hydrogen-fuelled ferries.

Away from transport, Scottish Power's Whitelee wind farm project proposed in my constituency demonstrates that the co-location of renewables and hydrogen production is on the cusp of commercial profitability. The proposal is to develop and install a combined solar photovoltaics, green hydrogen production facility and battery energy storage system in the existing wind farm site. It is proposed that hydrogen production will commence by

2023, with that sold as transport fuel within the Greater Glasgow area. That is the joined-up thinking that we really want to see developed across UK.

I cannot mention hydrogen production without mentioning Peterhead and St Fergus. The UK Government need to make up for the betrayal on that project and include it within the first CCS cluster to be given the go-ahead. I hope the Minister can confirm that while the White Paper shows only Grangemouth on the map of the UK, it will look at the overall project that links with St Fergus in the north and the hydrogen production facility. We also need the oil and gas transition deal to be signed off.

I can see I am getting a look from the Chair, so I will wind up. There are fantastic opportunities at stake here and I really hope that the UK Government grasp that. We need to see policies put in place going forward.

4.11 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on securing the debate, having guided it through the Backbench Business Committee process. He made an excellent case for the relevance and importance of the hydrogen economy, as did pretty much every hon. Member who spoke. It was a great pleasure to find that, far from my previous preconception, we have such a number of dedicated hydrogen geeks in this House able to put forward the debate in such a knowledgeable and concise way for our edification.

I do not need to reprise too much of that content, because we agree that the potential for the hydrogen economy in this country is not only bright but essential in our drive to net zero. We heard about how hydrogen will play a substantial role in the decarbonisation of heat and the efficiency of energy going into homes. We heard that it is more than possible to inject hydrogen into the system—after all, town gas used to be about 50% hydrogen before natural gas was introduced into the system, so it is not a new thing, but it could aid us enormously in getting down to net zero in our heating. Beyond 20%, we can envisage hydrogen towns, hydrogen islands and a whole range of hydrogen-heated areas. I was slightly disappointed to see in the energy White Paper how the Government are only thinking about consulting on hydrogen-ready boilers for the future. We need to get on with that now. Let us mandate hydrogen-ready boilers across the country tomorrow so that they are ready and we have the proper equipment to make it work when these things come to pass.

We also heard this afternoon about the role that hydrogen can play in heavy vehicular transport. I was slightly disappointed to read in the 10-point plan that the Government are consulting

“on a date for phasing out the sale of new diesel heavy goods vehicles”.

I hope that that can be done pretty immediately. We need to phase them out and replace them, as far as possible, with hydrogen-based heavy goods vehicles, because that is the obvious fuel for long-distance logistics.

We also heard about developments in other areas of transportation. Hydrogen trains and hydrogen buses are an essential part of our low-carbon fleet for the future. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) and others spoke about the enormous

[Dr Alan Whitehead]

opportunities in industrial clusters for the development and use of hydrogen. Those clusters stand ready to go now, and we need to get behind them as quickly as we can. Getting that work under way is a very important part of the future of the hydrogen economy.

I will briefly sound a little note of caution, which hon. Members did mention—albeit in passing—about the future. We need to recognise that hydrogen does not grow in the ground, but is produced; the question of how we produce it will be an essential element of the future health of the hydrogen economy. Hon. Members briefly mentioned the distinction between grey, blue, red and green hydrogen. We are getting an increasing number of colours in the hydrogen market.

Green hydrogen is, of course, hydrogen produced by electrolysis and therefore completely carbon neutral in its production and deployment. As the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) said, grey hydrogen comes from the process of cracking it from gas, with the obvious outcome of a large amount of carbon dioxide that has to be CCS'd if it is to become blue hydrogen and have any hope of taking part in the low-carbon economy. If we allow the production of hydrogen over the next period to go into the grey rather than the green camp, we will overthrow a lot of what we want to do regarding the low-carbon element of the hydrogen economy.

I earnestly ask the Government—I raised this briefly in BEIS questions yesterday—to consider very carefully what they back with the £240 million hydrogen fund announced in the 10-point plan and the energy White Paper. If that goes into grey hydrogen production, we will not have sorted out for ourselves a very good base for the hydrogen economy in the context of low carbon. If, on the other hand, we ensure early on that we have a head start in the world on the mass production of green hydrogen, we will not only put our hydrogen economy securely on a low-carbon base, but have tremendous potential export opportunities for jobs and industry—particularly the industrial clusters that were mentioned.

It is essential that we invest early in green hydrogen to get the hydrogen economy going properly. I have seen the very interesting minutes of the meeting that the Minister got together in June to discuss those points further; that was very much an element of the Council for Science and Technology briefing that he took part in. I hope he has firmly taken the message on board about future hydrogen production. Hydrogen has a bright future, but we have to create it in the right way to make it as bright as it can be. If we get it wrong at this stage, we will regret it severely, in terms of our net-zero carbon ambitions.

4.20 pm

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): It is a real pleasure to conduct this debate with you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I am very pleased to be taking part. I am conscious that we have to revert back to my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) at the end, so I have only about eight minutes—that shows how full of content and well informed the speeches were. It is a real pleasure, as Energy Minister, to take part in a debate in the House of Commons with so many right hon. and hon. Members participating at such a high level. It is the House of Commons at its best.

We heard a range of opinion, but we broadly agree about the way forward and the potential dynamism of the hydrogen economy. I pay special tribute to my hon. Friend for the tireless, indefatigable way in which he pushes hydrogen at every opportunity. Even though my officials might not agree, I hope he continues to do so, because it is absolutely necessary for Members of this House to hold the Government to account. I am very happy to take part in these debates and express the Government's point of view, share some of our thinking and respond to points that Members of the Opposition parties make.

The first thing I want to talk about is investment. One hears all the time about the German strategy—I have read the German strategy and the EU strategy this year. Ours will be different because we are looking at blue hydrogen, which the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) alluded to, and green hydrogen. The EU and German strategies talk almost exclusively about the production of renewable hydrogen. We in this country, given our North sea heritage and the assets there, want to do both. Ours will be a very interesting strategy. It is the first ever hydrogen strategy that the Government have produced. When it is published in the first half of next year, I look forward to having more debates and answering more questions about it.

This has been an extremely busy time for the energy industry. The Government have had the Prime Minister's 10-point plan, the second point of which was all about hydrogen. It outlined our ambition for a 5 GW capacity. Subsequent points in the 10-point plan referred to the use of renewables and decarbonised sources of fuel in jet propulsion and marine transport. A number of Members mentioned the role of hydrogen in transportation. It is absolutely right that we should be focusing on HGVs, for which it is particularly suited.

I can say to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) that I have been in a hydrogen car. I was not driving it—I was there in a ministerial capacity, so someone else was driving—but I look forward to taking that step in the imminent future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley and the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) have done a great job in this debate of highlighting the strengths of the HyNet industrial cluster. Everyone has said, "Let there not be a beauty contest," yet they have been very good at presenting the particular attractions of their areas. They have done a very good job on that. I am on the record as having pledged to visit HyNet, hopefully in the next few months. I have spoken to representatives of the cluster on Zoom and in various other forums, and they are doing a fantastic job in pushing this agenda.

On deployment, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) said that we should be going faster. We can always be going faster, and he is absolutely right to be holding the Government's feet to the fire. We should seek to deploy a lot of these business and financial incentives earlier, and I am working closely with officials to do that. However, I cannot stress enough that the success of the hydrogen deployment will involve a substantial degree of private capital and private investment. If we look at the deployment—the success—in making the offshore wind industry in this country the biggest installed capacity of any country in the world, we see that the reason it happened was that something

like £94 billion has been spent since 2010—the vast majority of which was private capital. It was not merely a function of the Government writing cheques; it was a function of the Government creating a framework and creating a CfD process, which private capital could participate in and spend and deploy the resources to develop the capacity. So I have to stress—it always comes up, and it is quite right for Opposition Members to push the Government on it—that ultimately the strength of the investment and the vast majority of the capital that will be deployed will come from private sources, which is a recipe for success.

I should mention the fact that we have hydrogen trials and that the Prime Minister announced in his 10-point plan that we want to see a hydrogen town. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun rightly raised the issue of the gas standards needing to catch up with the potential of hydrogen deployment. I have a conversation on that subject with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care on a regular basis, because ultimately that is their responsibility, given the health impact and the relevance to health and safety.

There are so many other points that I want to raise. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who is no longer in her place, made a very good point about how we should try to bring the public with us. Even today, there is not much knowledge or engagement from our constituents or from people across the country with regard to hydrogen issues. It is quite legitimately a job of Government to improve that situation. However, it is also the job of all of us as MPs to try to get that message out, because it is not simply the Government who have the platform—the bully pulpit. Each and every one of us here, as individual MPs, can also make the case.

John Spellar: RTFOs?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The right hon. Gentleman has wonderful timing; I was just coming to the points that he made. He made some very good points, particularly—if I may say so—about town gas. He is quite right, and the hon. Member for Southampton, Test made this point as well, that the transition from town gas to natural gas that happened in the 1960s and 1970s was a whole-country endeavour. He is also right to point out, as I think the hon. Member for Southampton, Test also did, that town gas was largely composed of hydrogen. So in a way, having hydrogen in the gas network is not so novel an idea; it has happened before. Of course it was a much dirtier gas then, but hydrogen as the basis of a heating system is something that we can certainly achieve.

The last thing I will say before I conclude—

John Spellar: RTFOs?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We can discuss that issue at another time; I am afraid that I am limited by time constraints today.

The last thing that I will say in conclusion is that this is not a beauty contest; there is huge opportunity for every part of the country to benefit from the hydrogen revolution. I look forward to speaking to right hon. and hon. Members about how we can best deploy capital in the levelling-up agenda. The fact that HyNet is represented by Members on both sides of the aisle, and also other areas, is a really good sign. We can work together to bring about the hydrogen revolution.

4.29 pm

Alexander Stafford: Very briefly, I listened carefully to what the Minister said. I noticed his use of the term “the hydrogen strategy in the first half of next year”; I was under the impression that it was in the first quarter of next year. I just wonder whether it has been pushed back. I also remind him about my comment on RTFOs.

I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in this debate—there were great speeches. I completely agree with the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who talked about bringing the public on board with us. We need to explain why hydrogen is better. It is very simple to understand an electric vehicle; I think people get confused by hydrogen cars and engines. We need to explain hydrogen. The Government have a job to do on that.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for talking about agriculture. That is a sector that I had not actually thought much about, but he is right—Rother Valley is 75% rural, and we can put hydrogen into our tractors and our processing equipment. It covers everything.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) and the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) talked about local companies, which I mentioned. It just shows that everyone can benefit.

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 17 December 2020

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Criminal Cases: Guidelines on Disclosure

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): I wish to provide an update in relation to the Attorney General's guidelines and the CPIA code of practice.

Disclosure

The disclosure of unused material in criminal cases remains a crucial part of ensuring a fair trial takes place and is essential in avoiding miscarriages of justice. Unfortunately, the failure to disclose material promptly has led to the collapse of a number of trials and has impacted on the public's confidence in the administration of the criminal justice system.

It is a priority for this Government to continue to encourage improvements in the disclosure process and to achieve permanent change. It is essential that we ensure there are fair trials for all and that we increase confidence in the criminal justice system.

The Proposed Changes

In November 2018, the Government published a "Review of the efficiency and effectiveness of disclosure in the criminal justice system", which made a set of recommendations to improve disclosure performance and to address the key challenges of modern disclosure practice. The review recommended that the Attorney General's guidelines on disclosure required an update in order to truly reflect the challenges of today's disclosure regime.

The guidelines provide a set of high-level principles on the disclosure of unused material in criminal cases, aimed at assisting investigators, prosecutors and defence practitioners in England and Wales apply the disclosure regime contained in the CPIA code of practice.

The changes seek to provide a better representation of the challenges the modern-day investigator, prosecutor and defence practitioner faces. The updated guidelines address the need for culture change, earlier performance of disclosure obligations, the use of technology and balancing the right to privacy with the right to a fair trial.

This is an opportunity to take a crucial step in the disclosure process, both to deal with issues that have been a long-standing concern and to provide practitioners with the tools they need to handle their disclosure obligations effectively.

Following the successful parliamentary passage of the statutory instrument in relation to the code of practice, I can now confirm that both the guidelines and the code will be effective from 31 December 2020. The Lord Chancellor and I thank all of those who have engaged with us during the process and we are grateful for the role that they have played in recognising the complex challenges that affect the proper performance of the duty of disclosure.

[HCWS662]

CABINET OFFICE

Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee Meeting

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee met today, 17 December, by video conference.

The meeting was co-chaired by the UK Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, and European Commission Vice President, Maroš Šefčovič, and attended by alternate Joint Committee co-chairs, the First Minister and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, and member state representatives.

The Committee undertook a review of Specialised Committee activity and withdrawal agreement implementation throughout the transition period. The Committee agreed to publish the second citizens' rights Specialised Committee Joint Report on residency and to finalise the list of arbitrators before the end of the transition period. The Joint Committee also adopted the following five decisions:

Citizens' rights

Triangulation of social security coordination between the UK, EU, European free trade agreement (EFTA) states;

The Northern Ireland protocol:

Agricultural subsidies;

Determination of goods not at risk;

Errors and omissions in the withdrawal agreement;

Arrangements under article 12(2) of the protocol.

Both the UK and EU made five unilateral declarations relating to the Northern Ireland protocol:

Export declarations;

Meat products;

Official certification;

Human and veterinary medicines; and

Article 10(1) of the protocol.

The decisions adopted at this meeting demonstrate the UK's and the EU's commitment to the implementation of the protocol in full so the people of Northern Ireland can have the fundamental legal assurances they need. Both the UK and the EU reiterated their commitment to upholding obligations under the withdrawal agreement and protecting the Belfast (Good Friday) agreement in all respects.

The UK and the EU emphasised their commitment to EU citizens in the UK and UK nationals in the EU, and to ensuring that their rights under the withdrawal agreement are protected. The Committee agreed to extend withdrawal agreement social security co-ordination between the UK and EU to European free trade agreement (EFTA) states from 1 January 2021.

The UK and the EU took the opportunity provided by this meeting to underline the commitment to continued constructive engagement through the Joint Committee processes after the end of the transition period.

Separately, the UK has confirmed that it will provide additional funding of over £200 million to the PEACE PLUS programme up to 2027, on top of the £300 million already committed, recognising its important contribution to the promotion of peace and reconciliation, and to cross-border economic and territorial development of Northern Ireland and the border region of Ireland.

[HCWS683]

Government's Civil Estate: Efficiency and Sustainability

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): I have today laid before Parliament, pursuant to Section 86 of the Climate Change Act 2008, the "State of the Estate in 2019-20". This report describes the efficiency and sustainability of the Government's civil estate and records the progress that Government have made since the previous year. The report is published on an annual basis.

The attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-12-17/HCWS669/>.

[HCWS669]

2025 UK Border Strategy

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Today, the Government will publish the 2025 UK border strategy. As we reach the end of the transition period, we have a unique opportunity to redesign our border for the benefit of the UK. The 2025 UK border strategy sets out how we will do this in partnership across the nations of the UK, the border industry and users of the border.

The 2025 UK border strategy sets out the transformations we will make to the border to create the most effective border in the world, harnessing the power of technology and data to revolutionise how the border operates. Implementing these transformations will make it easier for UK businesses to export and import while improving our ability to keep the UK safe and secure.

The strategy has been developed using the wealth of evidence and insight we received from stakeholders across the UK through the consultation we ran over the summer. The target operating model for the border which the strategy sets out will help businesses understand the longer term ambitions for the UK's border, and plan and invest accordingly.

The 2025 UK border strategy has today been laid as a Command Paper.

The attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-12-17/HCWS668/>.

[HCWS668]

TREASURY

Bilateral Loan to Ireland

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I would like to update Parliament on the loan to Ireland.

In December 2010, the UK agreed to provide a bilateral loan of £3.2 billion as part of a €67.5 billion international assistance package for Ireland. The loan was disbursed in eight tranches. The final tranche was drawn down on 26 September 2013. Ireland has made interest payments on the loan every six months since the first disbursement.

On 7 December, in line with the agreed repayment schedule, HM Treasury received a total payment of £407,852,313.75 from Ireland. This comprises the repayment of £403,370,000 in principal and £4,482,313.75 in accrued interest.

In October, as required under the Loans to Ireland Act 2010, HM Treasury provided the latest statutory report to Parliament covering the period from 1 April to 30 September 2020. The report set out details of future payments up to the final repayment on 26 March 2021. The Government continue to expect the loan to be repaid in full and on time. The next statutory report will cover the period from 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021. HM Treasury will report fully on all repayments received during this period in the report.

[HCWS673]

Contingencies Fund Advance: National Savings and Investments

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): HM Treasury and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury have agreed additional resource DEL funding of £40,500,000 for National Savings and Investments to respond to covid-19 issues, build greater operational resilience and prepare for a major retendering event.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £40,500,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for National Savings and Investments. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £40,500,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS674]

Economy Update

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): Covid-19 is the biggest threat this country has faced in decades and, throughout the first and now second waves of the virus, the Government have sought to protect people's jobs and livelihoods while also supporting businesses and public services across the UK, with over £280 billion of support spent so far. The vaccine deployment is a milestone in the recovery from the pandemic and the eventual return to normal life. While vaccination of the most vulnerable people has begun, it will take some time for the vaccine to be rolled out to the wider population. During this time, the Government remain committed to supporting people and businesses and providing them with the certainty they need.

In my previous statement to the House on 5 November 2020, I said we would review the scheme in January 2021. However, to provide certainty to businesses so that they can plan for the remainder of the winter and the new year, we have undertaken this review earlier. As the CJRS is already UK-wide, these changes will continue to apply to all devolved Administrations.

Following my last update in November, I can announce today that the coronavirus job retention scheme (CJRS) will be extended by another month, until the end of April 2021, with employees continuing to receive 80% of their current salary for hours not worked. Employers will be required to pay wages, national insurance contributions (NICS) and pensions for hours worked; and NICS and pensions only for hours not worked. The eligibility criteria for the scheme will remain unchanged, as I have previously set out.

The Government-guaranteed covid-19 business loan schemes—the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme (CBILS), the coronavirus large business interruption loan scheme (CLBILS) and the bounce back loan scheme (BBLs) have been open since the spring. As of 13 December, over 1.5 million businesses have been supported with facilities worth more than £68 billion.

To support UK businesses through continuing economic disruption, the Government have decided to extend the closing date to new applications for CBILS, CLBILS and BBLs. The schemes, currently due to close on 31 January 2021, will now be open to applications until the end of March. Together, the schemes provide vital support across all sectors of the UK economy for businesses who have been impacted by coronavirus. The loans can be used to support businesses with any liquidity needs, whether covering costs, additional expenditure or investment. We are extending the schemes now, ahead of Christmas and further into the new year, to provide businesses with continued access to the support they need through any continued disruption in early 2021. The British Business Bank will provide accredited lenders with further guidance in due course.

The Government will provide a further update on covid-19 economic support at Budget, which will be held on 3 March 2021.

[HCWS680]

Financial Services Update

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

On 24 November, in a written ministerial statement (WMS) (HCWS595), I committed to working with the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) to lay before Parliament and publish online before the December recess Dame Elizabeth Gloster's report into the FCA's regulation and supervision of London Capital and Finance plc (LCF) and the FCA's response.

This WMS provides an update on the investigation, the FCA's response and the Government's response. Pursuant to Section 82 of the Financial Services Act 2012, the report into the independent investigation, the FCA's response and a statement of reasons for withholding any material have been laid in the House today.

LCF was an FCA-authorized firm that primarily offered an unregulated investment product—commonly known as mini-bonds—to retail consumers. It entered administration in January 2019, impacting 11,625 people who invested around £237 million.

The Serious Fraud Office and FCA enforcement have launched an investigation into individuals associated with LCF. The Financial Reporting Council has also launched investigations into the audits of LCF.

I know that this has been a very difficult time for LCF bondholders. For some, this will have formed part of an investment portfolio, but for others, it will have represented a significant portion of their savings.

In May 2019, I directed the FCA to launch an independent investigation into the events relating to the FCA's regulation and supervision of LCF. To lead the investigation, I approved the appointment of Dame Elizabeth Gloster, who has had a distinguished career as a barrister and as a judge, in the High Court and the Court of Appeal.

On 23 November 2020, Dame Elizabeth delivered her report to the FCA. It concludes that the FCA did not effectively supervise and regulate LCF during the relevant period. She makes nine recommendations for the FCA, focusing on how they should improve their internal authorisation and supervision processes. The Government welcome the FCA's apology to LCF bondholders and their commitment to implement all of Dame Elizabeth's recommendations.

Dame Elizabeth also makes four recommendations for HM Treasury regarding the regulatory regime, which we accept in full.

First, Dame Elizabeth rightly recognises the challenges the FCA faces in regulating almost 60,000 firms and recommends that the Treasury should consider the optimal scope of the FCA's remit. The Government agree that they need to consider whether this scope is manageable, but it would be premature to do so before the ongoing FCA transformation programme has been delivered. I have discussed this reform programme with the Chair and Chief Executive and I am convinced it is the best means to address the recommendations. I have today exchanged letters with Mr Rathi agreeing that he will provide regular updates on the progress of these vital reforms.

Secondly, with regard to the regulation of mini-bonds, in May 2019 I announced that the Treasury would review the regulation of non-transferable debt securities. The FCA have also banned the promotion of high-risk "speculative illiquid securities"—including some of the riskiest "mini-bonds"—to ordinary retail consumers. Building on this work, and in light of Dame Elizabeth's report, the Treasury will launch a consultation in the new year on the regulation of non-transferable debt securities.

Thirdly, Dame Elizabeth raises concerns about a potential gap in responsibilities between Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the FCA in relation to the innovative finance ISA (IF ISA) products.

The FCA is making improvements to its oversight of financial promotions and, with HMRC, the Treasury is urgently looking at the sufficiency of checks on IF ISA managers and at the penalties regime. To improve communication and intelligence sharing, the FCA and HMRC are working to update their memorandum of understanding, and will set up an ISA intelligence working group. Reflecting the findings in Dame Elizabeth's report, the Treasury will also look at how understanding of the ISA wrapper could be increased so that consumers recognise that, as with any investment, there can be risks as well as possible rewards.

Finally, Dame Elizabeth notes the challenges that increased financial activity online poses for regulation. The FCA already has powers to take a variety of enforcement action against firms that carry out fraudulent activity. Nevertheless, the Treasury will continue to keep the legislative framework under review. As part of this, the Treasury is working with the FCA to consider whether paid-for advertising on online platforms should be brought into the scope of the financial promotions regime. The Treasury is also working with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to ensure that fraudulent online advertising is addressed as a priority harm through its online advertising programme.

It is important to acknowledge again that LCF's failure had a significant impact on the bondholders who have lost their hard-earned savings. There are several

ongoing, interlinked processes addressing the reasons for the failure of LCF and seeking to recover bondholders' investments. The three main channels through which bondholders can seek compensation are:

First, LCF's administrators are pursuing legal action to recover money. This process is ongoing, but is not expected to recover bondholders' investments in full, with the current estimate being that recoveries will be as low as 25% of a bondholder's investment.

Secondly, the financial services compensation scheme (FSCS) has carried out extensive investigations to determine whether LCF bondholders were eligible for FSCS compensation, and it has since compensated 159 bondholders who transferred out of stocks and shares ISAs to LCF bonds. The FSCS is also continuing to issue decisions to LCF bondholders who may have received misleading advice and it will provide an update in the new year. These activities—arranging transfers and advising on investments—are regulated activities and therefore eligible for compensation. In total, as of the start of December, the FSCS has paid out just over £50.9 million in compensation to 2,584 LCF bondholders. There is also an ongoing legal process, with a hearing scheduled for 19 January, which may further affect eligibility for FSCS coverage.

Lastly, the FCA will consider claims for compensation from LCF bondholders through their complaints scheme, which is available to bondholders who believe they have suffered financial loss as a result of actions or inactions of the FCA.

The Government recognise that LCF's failure and the loss of investment has had a significant and distressing impact on LCF's bondholders. With any investment there is a risk that, sometimes, investors will lose money. The purpose of regulation is to ensure that investors have the right information to understand their risk. Within this system, even the best regulators, doing everything right, will not be able to, and should not be expected to, ensure a zero-failure regime.

And the Government cannot, and should not be expected to, step in to compensate for every failure and every loss.

But it is clear in the case of LCF that there are multiple, complex reasons why people lost money. And the Government recognise that there is likely to be some variation in how much of their investment bondholders are able to recover through these processes.

The Government therefore announce that, taking into consideration the specific and complex set of circumstances surrounding the collapse of LCF, the Treasury will set up a compensation scheme for LCF bondholders. The scheme will assess whether there is a justification for further one-off compensation payments in certain circumstances for some LCF bondholders.

I will provide a further update in the new year with more detail on the Government's approach.

I would like to reiterate my sympathy for LCF bondholders and my commitment to act on Dame Elizabeth's recommendations, to ensure that our regulatory system maintains the trust of the consumers it is there to protect.

[HCWS678]

Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing: National Risk Assessment

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The UK's status as a global financial centre, our openness to trade and investment, and the ease of doing business here are all vital for our prosperity. These remarkable

strengths also make us vulnerable to the risk of illicit financial flows from money laundering and terrorist financing. The Government are committed to tackling these risks which undermine our economy and society and enable those who wish us harm to fund their activities.

Today, the Treasury and the Home Office are jointly publishing the UK's third national risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing (NRA). This assessment updates the findings of the second NRA to take account of new information and developments that have emerged since its publication in 2017. The report has also been laid in Parliament.

The key findings of the 2020 NRA are as follows:

The traditional high-risk areas of money laundering remain, including financial services, money service businesses (MSBs), and cash. However, new methods continue to emerge within these, as criminals adapt to increased restrictions and exploit vulnerabilities in different sectors and emerging technology.

The cryptoasset ecosystem has developed and expanded considerably in the last three years, leading to increased risk of money laundering.

The ability to conceal the beneficial owners make the art market attractive for money laundering, and art market participants have been assessed as posing a high-risk of money laundering.

Professional services remain attractive to criminals as a means to support laundering the proceeds of crime, through the creation and operation of corporate structures, the investment and transfer funds to disguise their origin, and through lending layers of legitimacy to their operations.

The UK's terrorist financing threat continues to involve low levels of funds being raised by UK individuals for the purpose of lifestyle spending and low sophistication attacks.

Since 2017, the UK's anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing regime has undergone review by the financial action taskforce. The UK achieved one of the best ratings of any country assessed so far in this round of evaluations, outperforming other states who are at the forefront of tackling money laundering and terrorism financing. However, no country can afford to be complacent, and there remain vulnerabilities that we must work to address.

Since the 2017 NRA, the Government have continued to take action to combat money laundering and terrorist financing. We have built on the success of the economic crime public-private partnership through the inception of the economic crime strategic board and the publication of the economic crime plan in 2019. We have also created the National Economic Crime Centre, and the Office for Professional Body Anti-Money Laundering Supervision, both of which have helped to further strengthen and co-ordinate our response to money laundering. The Government are also bringing forward plans to further strengthen corporate transparency through reforms to Companies House and the register of companies.

The UK will look to remain a leader in the global fight against money laundering and terrorist financing, and we will continue to revise and reform our response to economic crime as new risks and methodologies emerge. The publication of the third NRA today is an important step in this fight, as it provides a critical component of continued partnership and prioritisation between Government, law enforcement, supervisors and the private sector.

[HCWS672]

Tax Exemptions: Employers

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): On 9 July 2020, the Government agreed to introduce an income tax exemption and national insurance contributions (NICs) disregard to ensure that coronavirus antigen testing provided to employees outside the Government's national testing scheme will not attract tax and NICs liabilities.

The Government are now introducing a second income tax exemption and NICs disregard, to ensure that employees who purchase their own coronavirus antigen test and are reimbursed by their employer will not attract tax and NICs liabilities.

The Government recognise the importance of covid-19 testing. Currently, regular tests are available through the Government testing programme to a wide range of employees, including NHS workers. If an individual is tested through the Government testing programme, no tax or NICs liability will arise.

Under normal rules, the cash reimbursement of a test by an employer to an employee would constitute earnings, and the amount reimbursed would be subject to income tax and class 1 NICs as a result. However, the Government introduced NICs regulations—the Social Security Contributions (Disregarded Payments) (Coronavirus) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 (SI 2020/1523) on 14 December and will introduce a tax exemption in the next Finance Bill to ensure that no tax and NICs liabilities arise.

These exemptions will ensure that income tax and NICs will not be due on employer-reimbursed antigen tests carried out during the current tax year 2020-21.

Easement for employer-provided cycles exemption

The tax exemption for the employer provision of cycles and cyclist's safety equipment was introduced to support employers in promoting healthier journeys to work and to encourage green commuting. Many employers offer this in the form of cycle-to-work schemes.

One of the conditions of the exemption is that the cycling equipment provided should be used mainly for qualifying journeys (to or from work or in the course of work).

The Government's covid-19 restrictions have required many employees to work from home where possible. Therefore, many existing users of the scheme are not travelling to work and may be unable to meet the condition for qualifying journeys. Under the current application of the rules, these individuals would become liable to an income tax benefit in kind charge.

However, the Government will introduce a time-limited easement to disapply the condition which states that cycles must be used mainly for qualifying journeys. The easement will apply to existing users and will allow those individuals to continue to benefit from the tax exemption without needing to meet the qualifying journeys condition.

The easement will be available to employees who have joined a scheme and have been provided with a cycle or cycling equipment on or before 20 December 2020. The easement will be in place until 5 April 2022, after which the normal rules of the exemption will apply.

Therefore, employees who have joined a scheme and have been provided with a cycle or cycling equipment on or before 20 December 2020 will be permitted to an easement, and will not have to meet the qualifying

journeys condition until 5 April 2022. Employees who join a scheme from 21 December 2020 will need to meet all the normal conditions of the exemption.

[HCWS676]

Budget 2021: Office for Budget Responsibility Forecast

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): Today I can inform the House that I have asked the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) to prepare an economic and fiscal forecast for a Budget on 3 March 2021.

[HCWS679]

Special Resolution Regime Code of Practice

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I have today laid before Parliament an update to the special resolution regime code of practice. This update accounts for the transposition of the Bank Recovery and Resolution Directive (BRRD) II; changes made to the special resolution regime as a result of onshoring, including removing references to the concept of state aid; and increasing alignment with the Bank of England and HM Treasury crisis management memorandum of understanding.

The special resolution regime code of practice provides industry and the wider public with important guidance on how UK authorities would use the tools provided by the special resolution regime to protect UK financial stability by resolving failing financial institutions in an orderly way.

This version of the code of practice reflects the transposition of BRRDII through provisions in the Bank Recovery and Resolution (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (SI 2020/1350). These provisions will come into effect on 28 December and update the UK's resolution regime. The approach to transposition has been tailored to suit the UK's resolution regime, and the code of practice provides further guidance on what this means for firms.

The UK authorities have taken all the action they can to mitigate risks of disruption to cross-border financial services at the end of the transition period. As part of this preparation, the Treasury has amended the code of practice where EU legislation, including the concept of state aid, was referenced previously.

As set out in the Banking Act 2009, the code of practice has been updated in consultation with the Bank of England, the Prudential Regulation Authority, the Financial Conduct Authority and the financial services compensation scheme.

The Treasury has also consulted the banking liaison panel, a group of industry stakeholders who represent the interests of banks, and who have expertise in law relating to the UK's financial system and to insolvency law and practice.

This updated version of the code of practice will provide firms with the certainty and clarity they need by setting out how the UK's resolution regime will operate following changes in legislation and as a result of the ending of the transition period.

The report has been published on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/banking-act-2009-special-resolution-regime-code-of-practice-revised-march-2017>.

[HCWS675]

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

United Kingdom Internal Market Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): The UK Internal Market (UKIM) Bill is fundamental to providing a reliable legal basis for the effective and coherent functioning of the UK internal market. It guarantees that businesses and consumers across the UK are not subject to harmful internal trade barriers following our exit from the EU single market regime. Legislation of this kind must be in place across the whole UK in order to provide businesses and consumers from all parts of our country with the same legal protections and advantages.

From the outset, it has been the UK Government's objective to legislate for the UK Internal Market Bill with the consent of all the devolved legislatures. At every stage, we have followed the spirit and letter of the devolution settlement and worked hard to secure legislative consent for this vitally important piece of legislation for all of the UK. We have also engaged with businesses, business representative organisations and wider stakeholders, such as academics, across the entire country since the Bill's introduction to better understand expectations, needs and concerns. The UK Government regret the Scottish Government's decision to withdraw from UK-wide work on the internal market in spring 2019.

The engagement with the Welsh Government, in particular, has resulted in tangible changes to the Bill to accommodate concerns as well as strengthen devolved involvement within the machinery of the legislation. This includes putting the relationship between the market access principles and common frameworks on the face of the Bill as well as ensuring that the Secretary of State is obliged to seek the consent of the devolved Administrations when panel appointments are made to the Office of the Internal Market (OIM). We have also agreed to have an annual meeting to review the operation of parts 1 to 4 of the UK internal market legislation with the devolved Administrations, including the Office for the Internal Market's reports and new developments that might require the use of delegated powers, using our intergovernmental structures.

The UK Government do however deeply regret that the Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru have both refused to provide their consent for the Bill. We have maintained, throughout the Bill's passage, that the Government are open to discussing the concerns of each devolved Administration, and would make changes to the Bill where it is possible, without undermining the necessary purpose and integrity of the legislation. Proceeding with the Bill to Royal Assent is necessary to put the legal structures in place which provide clarity and consistency for businesses and citizens working across the country.

The Sewel convention envisages situations where the UK Parliament may need to legislate for the whole country in this way. The exceptional circumstances of our departure from the EU, and the need to provide a UK-wide legal underpinning for the internal market, is clearly one such situation. This Government are fully committed to the Sewel convention and the associated practices for seeking consent. Indeed, in the current

legislative session of Parliament alone, the UK Government have secured (to date) 37 LCMs from the devolved legislatures; this is in addition to the hundreds of other LCMs passed by the devolved legislatures over the last 21 years of devolution. We will, of course, continue to seek legislative consent, take on board views, and work with the devolved Administrations on all future Bills that engage the legislative consent process, just as we have always done.

The UK Internal Market Bill will allow people to do business reliably and seamlessly across all parts of the UK and enable the UK Government to boost our economic recovery, increase investment across the whole UK, create new jobs and be stronger as a country as we emerge from this pandemic. The UK Government stand as the conservator of this great Union—the most successful political and economic Union in history—as a force for bettering peoples' lives, with devolution delivering clear benefits for all UK citizens. The UK Internal Market Bill will help to ensure that England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland remain more prosperous, stronger and safer together.

[HCWS665]

DEFENCE

Future Nuclear Deterrent

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): On 18 May 2011, the then Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), made an oral statement to the House, *Official Report* col. 351, announcing the approval of the initial gate investment stage for the procurement of the successor to the Vanguard class ballistic missile submarines. He also placed in the Library of the House a report "The United Kingdom's Future Nuclear Deterrent: The Submarine Initial Gate Parliamentary Report".

As confirmed in the 2015 strategic defence and security review, this Government have committed to publishing an annual report on the programme. I am today publishing the ninth report, "The United Kingdom's Future Nuclear Deterrent: 2020 Update to Parliament".

A copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

The attachment can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-12-17/HCWS671/>.

[HCWS671]

EDUCATION

Educational Settings: January 2021 Return and Funding

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): As a Government we have made it a national priority that education and childcare settings should continue to operate as normally as possible during the coronavirus (covid-19) outbreak, and we have continued to work with the profession to continue full-time face-to-face education.

Since the start of the academic year, the continuing efforts of leaders, teachers and staff across education and childcare has ensured that settings remain as safe and covid-19 secure as possible. That remains the case

but the return at the start of January 2021 will take place in exceptional circumstances, when winter risks are acute and at a critical point in national efforts to control the virus.

We announced on 15 December 2020 that we will be deploying the latest rapid-result coronavirus tests to schools and colleges from January to enable weekly screening for the workforce and daily testing for the workforce and students who are a close contact of a positive case. This will help us to find those with the virus and isolate them quickly. It will also help us reduce the need for self-isolation of close contacts of positive cases, keeping staff and students in education and childcare. We will continue to work closely with schools, colleges, directors of public health and directors of children's services to implement this plan.

Today we can announce that we will be offering all secondary schools (including all-through schools and middle deemed secondary schools), colleges, special schools and alternative provision settings the help, support and supplies to test as many secondary-age and FE students as possible as they resume education in January. We have prioritised these settings because they have seen more disruption so far, associated with older children and young adults having had higher rates of covid-19. This will help identify asymptomatic cases—which make up a third of all cases—limiting the spread of the virus, and we strongly encourage all schools and colleges to participate. In middle deemed secondary schools, testing would be for years 7 and 8 pupils.

Already, the implementation of safety measures and the system of controls in place in education settings creates an inherently safer environment for children, young people and staff, in which PHE and DHSC have confirmed the risk of transmission of infection is substantially reduced. Given the exceptional public health circumstances, when settings return in week commencing 4 January, testing will help to identify asymptomatic cases more quickly. This will avoid individuals carrying the infection unknowingly and potentially spreading it in the local community.

For the week commencing 4 January, secondary schools (including middle/all-through schools, special schools and alternative provision) and colleges will only offer on-site provision for vulnerable children and young people, children of critical workers, those studying for or taking exams this academic year. They will provide remote education to all other pupils, before a full return to school and college from 11 January. The groups attending school and college from 4 January will be prioritised for testing, alongside the school workforce. Schools that wish to can use an extra inset day on 4 January to prepare to deliver the testing. Early years settings and primary schools will be open as normal in week commencing 4 January.

Testing will not be mandated and all students will be expected to attend school or college from 11 January regardless of whether a test has been undertaken (unless they are self-isolating because they have tested positive for coronavirus, have symptoms or have been advised to isolate by NHS Test and Trace).

To deliver testing at this speed and scale, armed forces personnel will support directly through planning with schools and colleges, in every local area. The remaining testing workforce will be made up of volunteers

and agency staff and reasonable costs will be reimbursed. Schools and colleges that opt in will need to provide a few members of staff to support the testing programme.

Testing, along with existing infection prevention and control measures such as ventilation, increased hygiene, and wearing of face coverings in communal areas of secondary schools where appropriate, can limit the number of children and young people missing out on face-to-face education because they have to isolate.

We realise that this year has been incredibly difficult for staff, students, pupils and parents. I want to thank all involved in education and childcare for their tireless dedication. The hard work of our education workforce has already substantially reduced the risk of transmission of covid-19 within education settings, and we will now use this new testing approach to be sure to reduce the risk of local community transmission in this age group and ensure more young people are able to remain in education, benefiting from the national priority of keeping education open for all.

This policy will be kept under review in light of scientific evidence, and the Government will provide further advice if necessary.

Today I am also glad to confirm school and early years revenue funding allocations for 2021-22. This announcement covers the dedicated schools grant (DSG), the pupil premium and the free school meal supplementary grant. The DSG distributes the second year of the multi-billion school funding settlement that I announced to Parliament on 3 September 2019. Compared to 2019-20, core school funding is increasing by £2.6 billion for 2020-21, £4.8 billion for 2021-22, and £7.1 billion for 2022-23. In addition, we continue to fund increases in teacher pay and pension costs from 2018 and 2019, worth £2 billion in 2021-22.

The distribution of the DSG to local authorities is set out in four funding blocks for each authority: a schools block, a high-needs block, an early years block, and a central school services block. In July 2020, the Minister of State for School Standards informed Parliament of the publication of primary and secondary units of funding for the schools' block, and the provisional allocations for the high-needs block and central school services block. In the DSG, these have now been updated with the latest pupil numbers to show how much each local authority will receive in 2021-22.

In the schools' block, funding in 2021-22 is increasing by over 3% per pupil, or 3.5% overall, compared to this year. In the high-needs block, funding to support children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is increasing by 10%.

I am also confirming the final hourly funding rates for the free early education entitlements in 2021-22. As a result of the £44 million investment in 2021-22 announced by the Chancellor in the spending review, we will increase the hourly funding rates for all local authorities for the two-year-old entitlement by 8p an hour. Funding for the three and four-year-old entitlement will increase by 6p an hour in the vast majority of areas. We are increasing the minimum funding floor for the three and four-year-old offer to £4.44 per hour.

Twelve local authorities have had their 2020-21 hourly funding rates for three and four year-olds protected by the "loss cap" in the early years national funding formula, to ensure that they do not face large drops to their

funding rate. Funding for 10 of these local authorities will be maintained in 2021-22 and two will see an increase to their hourly rate as they come off the loss cap in 2021-22.

I can also confirm that supplementary funding for maintained nursery schools will continue for the whole of the 2021-22 financial year, and the Government's commitment to the long-term funding of maintained nursery schools is unchanged.

Today, I am also announcing that the pupil premium will continue in 2021-22 with the same per pupil funding rates as in 2020-21. We will use the October 2020 census to calculate individual school-level allocations. This will ensure that this targeted investment can continue to support the most disadvantaged children in our schools.

Finally, I am also confirming that the free school meal supplementary grant, which was due to end in 2019-20, will be extended for one additional year, to 2020-21.

[HCWS684]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19: Tiers System

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Local action is vital to our strategy of suppressing the virus, while protecting the economy, education and the NHS, until a vaccine can make us safe. Help is on its way thanks to the rollout of a safe and effective vaccine, but we are not there yet.

While we have moved to a localised approach through the tiers system, we have been clear that these must be tough, recognising that case rates are rising in many areas of the country, and our knowledge that the winter months are the most challenging for our NHS.

We have assessed each area individually, and as Monday's decisions on Essex and today's decisions on Waverley and parts of Hampshire show, we are prepared to move to a more localised level where the data and human geographies permit.

As set out in the covid-19 winter plan, there are five indicators which guide our decisions for any given area, alongside consideration of "human geographies" like travel patterns.

These are:

- Case detection rates in all age groups
- Case detection rates in the over 60s
- The rate at which cases are rising or falling
- Positivity rate (the number of positive cases detected as a percentage of tests taken)
- Pressure on the NHS.

While each metric is important in its own right, the interplay between each indicator for a given area is equally important, so a hard and fast numerical threshold on each metric is not appropriate.

These are not easy decisions, but they have been made according to the best clinical advice, and the best possible data from the JBC.

The regulations will require the Government to review the allocations at least every 14 days. We will also take urgent action when the data suggests it is required, as we did on Monday.

The first formal review took place yesterday, and the allocations and a detailed rationale can be found as an attachment online.

I will also deposit the data packs used to inform these decisions in the Libraries of both Houses.

These changes will be implemented from 00:01 on 19 December. This list will also be published on gov.uk and a postcode checker will be available for the public to check what rules apply in their local area.

Attachments:

1. 16 December Tier Review (16 December Tier Review.docx)

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-12-17/HCWS677/>

[HCWS677]

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The Department of Health and Social Care has sought a repayable cash advance from the contingencies fund of £34,000,000,000.

The Department of Health and Social Care's net cash requirement cash limit has been used in full between April 2020 and December 2020 to support the running costs of the Department, NHS and arm's length bodies, including expenditure on the covid-19 pandemic.

The Department of Health and Social care will seek a significant increase to its voted funding at supplementary supply estimate to cover the increased costs of the covid-19 pandemic and this will be used to repay the advance after the Supply and Appropriation Act has received Royal Assent in March 2020.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £33,350,000,000 and additional capital of £650,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department of Health and Social Care. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £34,000,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the contingencies fund.

[HCWS666]

Reciprocal Healthcare Arrangements

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): Today I am notifying the House about arrangements the Government have made to support people who require ongoing, routine healthcare treatment in order to be able to travel to the European economic area or Switzerland after the end of the transition period, should there be no further negotiated outcome with the EU. These arrangements would commence from 1 January 2021.

Current reciprocal healthcare arrangements enable large numbers of UK-insured individuals to access healthcare when they live, study, work or travel in the European economic area or Switzerland, and vice versa when European economic area or Switzerland-insured individuals come to the UK. Although some people are covered under the withdrawal agreement, for everyone else these arrangements will come to an end on 31 December 2020.

Negotiations on future arrangements with the EU are ongoing and include necessary healthcare provisions. If agreed, such provisions would provide effectively the same healthcare cover as the European health insurance card (EHIC). The Government continue to work hard to secure these arrangements.

In the event we have not reached an EU-wide agreement on reciprocal healthcare, the Government will implement a time-limited healthcare scheme that supports UK residents with ongoing, routine treatment needs, who are visiting the European economic area or Switzerland from 1 January 2021. This type of treatment was previously covered under the EHIC scheme.

This Government will introduce the scheme with the intention that it is used by individuals who are certain to require treatment while abroad, such as regular dialysis, oxygen therapy or certain types of chemotherapy. The Government recognise that these ongoing, routine treatment costs can be expensive, and makes travelling abroad extremely challenging for many people.

The scheme will be temporary and will cover travel that takes place between 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021. People applying for the scheme must be ordinarily resident in England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland and entitled to the treatment on the NHS. Individuals will need to work with their NHS clinician to agree their treatment requirements and confirm they meet the criteria in the scheme.

The NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) will deliver this scheme for the whole of the UK. NHSBSA is an arm's length body of the Department of Health and Social Care. It provides a range of critical central services to NHS organisations, NHS contractors, patients and the public.

The exception to the new scheme is travel to Ireland as the UK and Irish governments are committed that UK and Irish residents should continue have access to necessary healthcare when visiting the other country.

The Government will assess its options for reciprocal healthcare if we do not achieve an EU-wide arrangement. This includes the possibility of negotiating bilateral arrangements on social security coordination, including reciprocal healthcare, with individual EU member states.

The Department of Health and Social Care will publish further guidance on the scheme, its criteria and application process shortly.

[HCWS670]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Provisional Police Grant Report: England and Wales 2021-22

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has today published the provisional police grant report (England and Wales) 2021-22. The report sets out the Home Secretary's determination for 2021-22 of the aggregate amount of grants that she proposes to pay under section 46(2) of the Police Act 1996. A copy of the report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Today the Government are setting out the provisional police funding settlement for 2021-22. Overall funding for the policing system will total up to £15.8 billion, a £636 million increase on the 2020-21 funding settlement. Within this, available funding to police and crime commissioners (PCCs) will increase next year by up to an additional £703 million, assuming full take-up of precept flexibility. This would represent an increase to PCC funding in cash terms of 5.4% on top of the 2020-21 police funding settlement.

Recruitment

The additional funding for PCCs includes an increase of £415 million to Government grants for the recruitment of a further 6,000 additional officers by the end of March 2022, the second year of the police uplift programme (PUP). This increased investment for year 2 will allow PCCs and their forces to continue building on the excellent progress made so far in year 1 of the PUP, where, so far, 5,824 of the year 1 target of 6,000 officers have been recruited.

We are expanding the scope of the police uplift programme for year 2 to bolster capability in serious and organised crime units across forces and counter-terrorism policing. Strengthening policing's presence in the organised crime units will help us meet our manifesto promise to counter the growth of serious and organised crime, including fraud, county lines, child abuse and cyber-crime. The uplift in counter-terrorism policing will ensure they have the resources needed to maintain capacity against a changing and increasingly complex threat picture. Recruitment allocations for year 2 of the programme are set out in the tables available as an attachment online.

To ensure that progress in recruitment is maintained, and to track the use of this investment efficiently, the Government will continue to ring-fence £100 million of the additional funding. PCCs will be allocated their share of ring-fenced funding in line with their funding formula allocation, and will be able to access the funding as they progress against their recruitment targets. Further information will be set out as part of the grant agreements for 2021-22. Each PCC will be awarded a local (territorial policing) officer recruitment target as in year 1, and for year 2 will also be provided a regional and organised crime unit officer target, also in line with their funding formula allocation. The ROCU uplift will be funded through PCCs using the same mechanism. As ROCU functions require more experienced officers, forces will release existing officers to ROCUs and replace them with the additional officers recruited via the PUP to ensure overall workforce growth.

Funding for the recruitment of officers in counter-terrorism policing will be paid to forces through dedicated counter-terrorism policing grants.

Precept

As set out as part of the spending review 2020, PCCs will also be able to raise further funding through precept flexibility, subject to confirmation at the final local government finance settlement. PCCs will be empowered to increase their band D precept by up to £15 in 2021-22, without the need to call a local referendum. If all PCCs decide to maximise their flexibility, this would result in up to an additional £288 million of funding for local policing next year. It is for locally accountable PCCs to take decisions on local precept.

In addition to this, PCCs will receive a portion of the £670 million of additional grant funding announced for local council tax support as part of the spending review 2020. This funding will help local authorities to continue reducing council tax bills for those least able to pay, including households financially hard hit by the pandemic. Further details on the proposed allocation methodology have been announced as part of the policy paper on covid-19 support in 2021-22.

Capital funding

This settlement will provide PCCs with £12.3 million funding for capital expenditure. £52.3 million capital funding will be spent on national priorities and infrastructure including police technology programmes, the College of Policing and serious organised crime programmes.

Counter-terrorism policing

It is important that we ensure counter-terrorism policing has the resources needed to deal with the threat we face. That is why funding for CT policing will total up to £914 million in 2021-22. This continued investment in CT policing will support record high numbers of ongoing counter-terrorism policing investigations and enable the UK to respond more quickly and effectively to keep the country safe from a range of threats, wherever they take place.

In addition, CT policing will receive £32 million for a new CT operations centre. The new CT operations centre will co-locate partners from across law enforcement, the UK intelligence community and the criminal justice system to improve the way in which we respond to a range of threats, including terrorism, and some elements of hostile state activity and organised crime.

PCCs will be notified separately of force-level funding allocations for CT policing, which will not be made public for security reasons.

National priorities

The Home Office will continue to invest in law enforcement through funding for national policing priorities.

This settlement of £1.1 billion in 2021-22 for national policing programmes and priorities builds on the Government's commitment to reduce serious violence and crime and clamp down on county lines. This will allow us to "surge" the police's response to violent crime where it is most prevalent, expand police capacity to tackle online drivers of violence and build stronger evidence on how to prevent homicides. We are continuing to invest in violence against women and girls, and the scourge of domestic abuse.

Tackling serious and organised crime and delivering our manifesto commitment to strengthen the National Crime Agency (NCA) is also a critical part of the Government's wider crime reduction agenda. As criminal networks become increasingly adaptable and resilient, we need to ensure that the funding is available to support the police in disrupting organised criminal activity. To this end, this settlement will protect funding for the NCA to target drug trafficking, child sexual exploitation and abuse, economic crime and organised immigration crime. ROCUs, which are an essential part of this approach, will also see their officer numbers boosted as part of the PUP. This will unlock the outcomes we all want to see for the country—more of the highest harm criminal enterprises disrupted and dismantled, more disruptions and convictions of high harm organised criminals, reducing the cost of serious crime to our economy, and increasing confidence in the UK's financial system.

Transformation and reform

The Government will continue to support the completion of national transformation policing programmes delivering enhanced national capabilities across policing. This will include: continuing delivery of the Single Online Home

digital platform to forces and providing better engagement between the police and the public; completing the roll out of the National Enablers programme to ensure all forces have the enabling tools that support collaboration and agile ways of working in response to covid-19 and access to cyber-security capabilities to increase resilience; helping forces to deliver a fully accredited, more integrated and sustainable forensic service; maintaining investment in forensics, including digital forensics, to build capability across policing and for new officers; and further development of the national data analytics solution to support preventative policing interventions and the formation of the new National Crime and Justice Lab through the use of data analytics to identify perpetrators and protect the vulnerable to effectively reduce crime. We are also increasing funding for the National Police Chiefs Council to boost co-ordination of, and response to, national issues and providing strong central support so chief constables can focus on fighting crime.

I have established and chair the Strategic Change and Investment Board (SCIB), which forms part of the sub-governance of the National Policing Board. The SCIB will oversee all national law enforcement programmes; it will co-ordinate, prioritise and drive investment in and delivery of national capabilities across the policing system to ensure they support Government priorities around crime prevention and reduction. The SCIB will also oversee the investment in major technology programmes and, through the newly established Digital and Technology sub-board, it will support delivery of complex technology programmes and prioritise policing's future investment requirements.

Outcomes and efficiency

The Government expect the police to continue to build on the progress made on improving efficiency and productivity in return for the significant increase in investment. As such, the Government expect to see:

6,000 further officers—on top of the first tranche of 6,000 to be recruited in 2020-21—recruited by the end of March 2022. The Government will ring-fence £100 million of the funding for the uplift, which will be paid to forces in line with their progress in recruitment.

£120 million of efficiency savings from across the law enforcement sector—which are reflected in the funding set out as part of the settlement—delivered in 2021-22. We expect these to be delivered through a combination of improved procurement practices (including the delivery of £20 million of savings through BlueLight Commercial) as well as savings in areas such as estates, agile working and shared/enabling services. We expect the policing sector to work with the Home Office in setting up and supporting a new Efficiency in Policing Board. The board will improve the evidence base on efficiencies delivered to date, identify opportunities for gains over this and future SR periods, share best practice in relation to the delivery of efficiencies, and monitor and support delivery of gains.

Policing needs to ensure that high quality data is collected and utilised effectively to support local delivery, identify efficiencies and support the National Policing Board's drive to deliver the best possible policing outcomes for the public. The Home Office and National Police Chiefs Council will bring together in one document their strategies, plans and initiatives for improving data collection and use across the sector and with key delivery partners such as criminal justice agencies.

This settlement sets out the Government's continued commitment to supporting and investing in our police. I am extremely pleased with the progress forces have made on recruitment, and we are firmly on track to

meet the first-year target. This year has once again highlighted the police's exceptional bravery and commitment to public service. Sector leaders, frontline officers and staff have responded with speed and flexibility to the unprecedented challenges brought about by the covid-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, forces have redesigned their working practices, adapted to implement new and evolving covid-19 regulations and collaborated to ensure all personnel have had the necessary equipment and support to do their jobs safely. Officers and staff have worked tirelessly with the public to build understanding of the rules intended to control this deadly virus, all the while continuing to tackle crime and disorder in our communities. This is policing at its best, and I would like to express my immense gratitude for these continued exemplary efforts.

I have set out in a separate document, available online, the tables illustrating how we propose to allocate the police funding settlement between the different funding streams and between police and crime commissioners for 2021-22. These documents are intended to be read together.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2020-12-17/HCWS663>.

[HCWS663]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety Update

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): I have today announced the next set of measures as part of our ongoing support to the thousands of leaseholders who have found themselves living in unsafe buildings through no fault of their own.

These measures support our unwavering commitment to improve the safety of buildings across the country, which will be enshrined in law next year through the Building Safety Bill.

£30 million waking watch relief fund

Research undertaken and published by my Department has illustrated clearly the excessive costs some leaseholders are facing to fund interim safety measures such as waking watches. Such excessive costs are a national scandal, and it is right that we step in to support leaseholders in this position.

That is why today I have announced a new £30 million fund for leaseholders in England to pay for the installation of fire alarm systems in high-rise buildings with cladding, removing or reducing the need for costly interim safety measures such as waking watches. Our research suggests that this will save individual leaseholders an average of £137 per month and collectively over £3 million per month.

This step is supported by the National Fire Chiefs Council, who have been clear in their updated October guidance that building owners should move to install common fire alarms as quickly as possible to reduce or remove dependence on waking watch.

The fund will open in January, but importantly, will also provide immediate, emergency support to Wicker Riverside apartments in Sheffield to ensure that the

35 evacuated families should be able to return to their homes before Christmas. They were told to evacuate after the building failed fire safety tests.

This intervention will help worried leaseholders by providing financial support and delivering a better, long-term fire safety system in their buildings.

Building safety fund

In May we launched the £1 billion building safety fund to accelerate the removal of unsafe non-ACM cladding systems on high-rise residential buildings, taking the Government's total funding for cladding remediation to £1.6 billion.

Demand for this fund has been significant, receiving over 2,700 registrations since opening. My Department has been working at pace and with building owners to process these registrations and ensure that as many buildings as possible can access the fund—a task that has been made challenging by the failure of many buildings to provide basic eligibility information.

It has become clear that many building owners will be unable to complete applications by our intended deadline of 31 December 2020, adding to the concerns of many leaseholders. To address this, I have announced that building owners will now have until 30 June 2021 to complete their applications.

This means that hundreds more buildings will be remediated and thousands of residents will be protected from costs. We are also making good progress on applications already received and expect many more to be agreed before Christmas.

ACM cladding remediation

Today we have also published the latest data setting out our progress in removing the most dangerous "Grenfell-type" ACM cladding.

We have continued to prioritise this vital safety work throughout the pandemic, seeing a 50% increase in buildings where workers have started on site this year compared to December 2019 and an increase of 58% in fully remediated buildings. This work is particularly challenging due to the complex construction issues affecting many buildings which must be overcome to ensure they are remediated safely.

Final figures for the year will be published in January, and we expect this to show that around 95% of high-rise buildings with ACM cladding identified last year will have started remediation works by the end of 2020. This is significant progress that we will continue to drive forward to meet our commitment that these buildings should be fully remediated by 2022.

Ongoing work to support leaseholders

Today's measures are another important step in our ongoing work to support leaseholders, and they build on progress we have already made. This includes securing agreement that owners of flats in buildings without cladding do not need an EWS1 form to sell or re-mortgage their property—benefiting nearly 450,000 homeowners. Real progress has been made in an incredibly challenging and complex area.

We have been clear that the building industry must contribute towards the costs of making homes safe and set right decades of unsafe practices. Work continues at pace to develop further financial solutions to protect leaseholders. I look forward to announcing further details in the new year.

[HCWS685]

Local Government Update

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): It is a matter of public record that Merseyside Police have for many months been conducting an investigation which has resulted in a number of arrests made on suspicion of fraud, bribery, corruption and misconduct in public office, both in December 2019 and in September 2020. Further arrests were made on 4 December 2020 in connection with offences of bribery and witness intimidation. This investigation involves a significant connection to Liverpool City Council.

This raises significant concerns as to whether the authority is currently complying with its best value duty under section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999.

Having carefully considered the evidence available to me, including information provided by the city council in response to requests from my Department, it is clear that the council has taken significant steps to improve governance and assurance processes within the council, with respect to the authority's planning, highways, regeneration and property management functions. However, given the seriousness of the issues identified through the police investigation, and to support the council to continue to strengthen its governance, and deliver services for the people of the city, I would like to have direct, independent assurance that the council is compliant with its best value duty. I have therefore today decided to exercise the powers granted to me by Parliament under the Local Government Act 1999 to appoint Max Caller CBE to carry out an inspection of the authority's compliance with its best value duty. The matters to be covered by the inspection will be the authority's planning, highways, regeneration and property management functions and the strength of associated audit and governance arrangements.

I have asked Max Caller CBE to report findings to me by 31 March 2021, or such later date as he agrees with me.

I hope honourable Members will appreciate that we cannot be drawn into more detail while investigations are ongoing. Once the inspection is complete, I will carefully consider the inspection report. If it shows that the authority is in breach of its best value duty, I will then consider whether or not to exercise my powers of intervention under section 15 of the 1999 Act.

At this challenging time with respect to the covid-19 pandemic, it is critical that Liverpool City Council continues to deliver public services and carry out its other statutory duties as effectively as possible, and I thank those working in the council for all they have done to date. My Department is committed to providing the local authority with whatever support it may need to address these issues. Honourable Members and the people of Liverpool can be assured that the Government will do all we can to support the city of Liverpool.

[HCWS681]

JUSTICE

Independent Review of Terrorist Supervision: Government Response

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): In November last year, Usman Khan, a convicted terrorist being supervised in the community

on licence and managed under the statutory multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA), attacked and killed Jack Merritt and Saskia Jones at Fishmongers' Hall, London Bridge. This was a terrible atrocity that understandably aroused significant public concern, and as part of our response to it, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I commissioned a review into the effectiveness of MAPPA in the management of terrorist and other extremist offenders. We appointed Jonathan Hall QC, the Government's independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, to undertake the review.

In his report, Jonathan Hall found that MAPPA is a well-established process and did not conclude that wholesale change is necessary. However, he made important recommendations to enhance the statutory agencies' capabilities in managing terrorist offenders under MAPPA. We published his report on 2 September and indicated that we would in due course provide him with a formal response to his recommendations. I can tell the House that the Home Secretary and I have today written to Jonathan Hall, setting out how we are implementing the key changes which he recommended.

I have placed a copy of our letter in the Library of the House.

The Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill is introducing a number of changes which Jonathan Hall subsequently recommended, including giving judges the power to define crimes as terror-related, even if not terror offences as set out in law, and requiring high-risk terrorist offenders to undergo polygraph tests while on licence. We will legislate next year to introduce further powers for the police and probation service in line with Jonathan Hall's recommendations.

The creation of a new national security division in the National Probation Service will mean there are twice as many probation staff dedicated to the supervision of terrorism-risk offenders and strengthen its work with police, prisons and the security services.

Keeping our communities safe is the Government's first priority and we have made considerable investment in counter-terrorism. Our security services, police, prison and probation officers epitomise public duty and we hope that these new powers and ways of working will help them to further improve the tremendous, challenging work they do.

Recent atrocities in France and Austria have shown us that continued vigilance is needed to protect the United Kingdom from the scourge of terrorism and extremism. We believe that implementing agreed recommendations from Jonathan's report will, alongside improvements already in progress by counter-terrorism police and the National Probation Service, strengthen the supervision of these dangerous offenders and give the statutory agencies the tools which they need to defeat those who threaten us and our way of life.

[HCWS686]

Judicial Conduct Investigations Office: Annual Report 2019–20

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): With the concurrence of the Lord Chief Justice, I will today publish the 14th annual report of the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office (JCIO).

The JCIO supports the Lord Chief Justice and the Lord Chancellor in our joint statutory responsibility for judicial discipline.

The judiciary comprises approximately 22,000 individuals serving across a range of jurisdictions. Over the past year, the JCIO received 1,292 complaints against judicial office holders, and 42 investigations resulted in disciplinary action.

I have placed copies of the report in the Libraries of both Houses, the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office. Copies are also available online at: <https://judicialconduct.judiciary.gov.uk/reports-publications/>

[HCWS682]

TRANSPORT

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I hereby give notice of the Department for Transport having drawn advances from the Contingencies Fund totalling £5,808,000,000 to enable expenditure on covid-19 support packages to be spent ahead of the passage of the Supply and Appropriation Act. The schemes include: emergency measures agreements and emergency recovery measures agreements with the train operating companies; the covid-19 bus services support grant; safeguarding critical ferry freight routes; and supporting regional transport networks such as Transport for London and light rail networks.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £4,574,000,000 and additional capital of £1,234,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department for Transport. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £5,808,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The cash advance will be repaid upon receiving Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.

[HCWS664]

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government Change: Social Mobility Commission

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): The sponsorship and secretariat of the Social Mobility Commission will move to the Cabinet Office to be part of the new Equality Hub. This machinery of government change will put the commission's work at the heart of Government and ensure that our commitment to levelling up and equality of opportunity is the responsibility of all Departments. This change is also in line with the recommendation from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. The change will take effect on 1 April 2021.

[HCWS667]

Petition

Thursday 17 December 2020

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Extension to transition period for UK exit of the European Union

The petition of a resident of Twickenham,

Declares that the absence of a deal with Europe has made it impossible for businesses in the UK and in Europe to prepare properly for Brexit; further declares that there are reports from authoritative independent sources, such as, but not limited to, the Institute for Government, that parts of central and local government and other public bodies are far from ready for Brexit by the current end of the transition period, even if a deal with the European Union is agreed in coming weeks; further that this problem affects trade in goods and services with Europe and with the rest of the world where trade deals need to be renegotiated; further that it

is likely that this incomplete preparation in many areas of the UK will impact the UK's ability to meet its substantial and ongoing need to import medicines, foods and key workers from Europe and elsewhere and export goods and services to generate economic growth, employment and tax income to pay for public services and pandemic-inflicted state debts; further that it is likely this will result in substantial and easily-avoidable harm to the lives, liberties and livelihoods of UK citizens; and further that the country needs time to recover economically from the pandemic to make sufficient changes to prepare for leaving the European Union.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take all necessary steps to persuade the European Union to recommit to the originally offered two-year extension to the transition period, to ensure that the UK has time to secure long-term trading arrangements with Europe and the rest of the world and to stabilise the state and private sectors after the effects of the pandemic so that they are ready to leave the European Union.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Munira Wilson.]*

[P002642]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 17 December 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	365	CABINET OFFICE—continued	
Blind and Partially Sighted People: Voting.....	369	Strengthening the Union	365
British Nuclear Test Veterans.....	376	Topical Questions	379
Civil Service Jobs	377	UK Preparedness: End of Transition.....	369
Covid-19: Consultants	372	UK-EU Negotiations.....	367
Electoral Fraud.....	375	UK-EU Negotiations: Devolved Administrations..	371
May 2021 Local Elections: Covid-19.....	374	United Kingdom Internal Market Bill: Strength of	
Office for Veterans' Affairs.....	378	Union	378
Regional Equality	371		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 17 December 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ATTORNEY GENERAL	31WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL	
Criminal Cases: Guidelines on Disclosure.....	31WS	GOVERNMENT	51WS
		Building Safety Update.....	51WS
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL		Local Government Update	53WS
STRATEGY	41WS	JUSTICE	53WS
United Kingdom Internal Market Bill	41WS	Independent Review of Terrorist Supervision:	
CABINET OFFICE	32WS	Government Response	53WS
2025 UK Border Strategy.....	33WS	Judicial Conduct Investigations Office:	
Government's Civil Estate: Efficiency and		Annual Report 2019–20	54WS
Sustainability	33WS	PRIME MINISTER	56WS
Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee Meeting .	32WS	Machinery of Government Change: Social	
DEFENCE	42WS	Mobility Commission	56WS
Future Nuclear Deterrent	42WS	TRANSPORT	55WS
EDUCATION	42WS	Contingencies Fund Advance	55WS
Educational Settings: January 2021 Return and		TREASURY	33WS
Funding.....	42WS	Bilateral Loan to Ireland.....	33WS
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	45WS	Budget 2021: Office for Budget Responsibility	
Contingencies Fund Advance	46WS	Forecast	40WS
Covid-19: Tiers System	45WS	Contingencies Fund Advance:	
Reciprocal Healthcare Arrangements.....	46WS	National Savings and Investments	34WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	47WS	Economy Update	34WS
Provisional Police Grant Report:		Financial Services Update.....	35WS
England and Wales 2021-22	47WS	Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing:	
		National Risk Assessment	37WS
		Special Resolution Regime Code of Practice.....	40WS
		Tax Exemptions: Employers.....	39WS

PETITION

Thursday 17 December 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>
PRESENTED PETITION	5P
Extension to transition period for UK exit of the	
European Union	5P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Thursday 24 December 2020**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 17 December 2020

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 365] [see index inside back page]

Chancellor of Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office

Business of the House [Col. 385]

Statement—(Mr Rees-Mogg)

Covid-19 Update [Col. 405]

Statement—(Matt Hancock)

Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement [Col. 426]

Statement—(Robert Jenrick)

Christmas Adjournment [Col. 448]

Royal Assent [Col. 471]

Christmas Adjournment [Col. 472]

Petition [Col. 494]

Free Sanitary Products in Schools [Col. 495]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Fairs and Showgrounds [Col. 207WH]

UK Hydrogen Economy [Col. 232WH]

Written Statements [Col. 31WS]

General Debates

Petition [Col. 5P]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
