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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 3 February 2021

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Orders, 4 June and 30 December 2020).

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

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Support for Welsh Businesses

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support Welsh businesses. [911544]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): The Government have provided Welsh businesses with wide-ranging support, including more than £1.5 billion in bounce back loans, £503 million in coronavirus business interruption loans, £726 million for the self-employed income support scheme, in addition to the £5.2 billion funding guarantee given to the Welsh Government.

Paul Howell [V]: It is important that, as we build back better and progress the levelling up agenda, businesses in all parts of our United Kingdom are encouraged to maximise the benefits of Brexit and the multitude of trade agreements secured by the Department for International Trade. Can my right hon. Friend give me reassurances that he is working with the DIT to ensure that businesses get the best out of Brexit? Whether those businesses are in Wrexham, Clwyd South, or Sedgefield, we should work as one United Kingdom.

Simon Hart: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. He makes a crucial Union point in his question. We have secured trade deals with more than 60 countries, which is good for Wales, good for Welsh business and good for the UK. I should also tell him that we are working with the Secretary of State for International Trade on putting a proper dedicated team into Wales to deal with these matters in that capital city.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: It costs British Wool 50p a kilo to bring Welsh mountain sheep's wool to market where it sells for only 30p a kilo. I wrote to the Prime Minister six months ago to ask what he was doing to boost this fantastic Welsh product now that his Government are responsible for procurement. Welsh wool as a raw material for carpets and upholstery should be woven into every relevant UK Government-funded public project contract by now. Why is it not?

Simon Hart: I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for raising that question. Indeed, she has raised it with me before, as have a number of others. I have strong sheep-farming interests in my own constituency and I know the problem to which she refers. We are working closely with our colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and indeed with the Welsh Government on this and a range of other issues. Since the end of the transition period, we do have more flexibility in our markets for wool and in other matters, but home procurement is very much top of the Government's agenda.

Liz Saville Roberts: Timing does seem to be a bit of an issue with the Government. Almost a month has gone by, and it seems that Wales is still waiting for a reply from the UK Government about our final financial settlement. This, of course, has created unnecessary doubt over the date of the Welsh Budget. Welsh businesses and public services are enduring ongoing uncertainty over funding, and this will handicap our response to the pandemic. Will the Secretary of State please explain what is the point of his office if he cannot even persuade his colleagues in the Treasury to speak to the Welsh Government?

Simon Hart: That is a slightly strange question, given that the relationship between the Treasury and the Welsh Government, particularly around covid recovery, has been conducted on a daily, if not hourly, basis, with vast sums of money being made available to businesses and individuals of Wales, very much in the spirit of collaboration and co-operation. Rather than trying to make cheap political points, the right hon. Lady should acknowledge the fact that, in these very difficult times, two Governments have worked quite well together and the Union, which is perhaps the point that she does not like me to make, has been particularly crucial in that process.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab) [V]: Before I start, on behalf of the Labour party, I would like to pay tribute to Captain Tom Moore and send our deepest condolences to his family.

Cockle-gathering in both north and south Wales is not just a job, but a way of life, dating back generations. Gatherers, who are already alarmed at DEFRA advice that they could not resume the export of shellfish until April, now feel not just forgotten, but utterly betrayed to discover that UK Ministers knew all along that the EU ban on importing non-decorated UK shellfish would be indefinite. What urgent action will the Secretary of State and his Government take to facilitate the resumption of shellfish exports and save this traditional industry from disappearing forever?

Simon Hart: I join the hon. Lady in her tribute. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be making a more formal statement in a few minutes' time, but I do recognise—as does the whole House—the comments she makes.

On the industry and sector to which the hon. Lady refers, I am in close contact with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Cabinet Office and, indeed—through the Government—the EU, to make the distinction between

teething issues that might be arising out of the particular subject to which she refers, and perhaps more permanent structural matters that may need a longer-term solution. I assure her and the industry that we are very seized of the challenges that the industry currently faces.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab) [V]: Small businesses in Cardiff North and across the country are struggling to cope with impossible red tape, with no time to prepare due to this Government's eleventh-hour Brexit deal. Despite more than 10 days preparing the correct documents for full compliance, a local family export meat business has had its produce turned away in Italy, leading to thousands of pounds of stock being destroyed. The owners have subsequently been up all night every night trying to salvage and recoup. They do not want to hear excuses such as "teething problems" when it is their and their employees' livelihoods on the line, so can the Secretary of State clarify what urgent actions he and his colleagues are taking to resolve these issues, and will he meet me along with this business to see how he can help?

Simon Hart: I received the hon. Lady's letter about this particular constituent only last night. I am very happy to meet her and to see if we can resolve her constituent's particular problems; that letter is already receiving the urgent attention that it deserves. I would challenge her on the readiness point that she makes more generally, given the numerous levels of engagement that I and other Government colleagues conducted in the run-up to the end of the transition period; and given the reaction since then from businesses and stakeholders across Wales. They are generally supportive of the fact that a deal has been reached and of the opportunities that it presents, and now actually want to get on with a positive relationship with the EU and the other countries with which we deal.

Covid-19 Vaccines: Delivery to Wales

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Minister for Vaccine Deployment on the delivery of covid-19 vaccines to Wales. [911545]

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What discussions he has had with the (a) Minister for Vaccine Deployment, (b) Secretary of State for Defence and (c) Welsh Government on the delivery of covid-19 vaccines to Wales. [911547]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): I have regular discussions with the Minister for Vaccine Deployment, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), as well as Defence Ministers and the First Minister of Wales, on the delivery of covid-19 vaccines. Rapid vaccine roll-out is key to us getting back to normality.

Claire Coutinho: The work being done in Wrexham to manufacture the vaccine is quite literally saving lives in my constituency of East Surrey. Will the Secretary of State join me in extending our thanks to all those workers and the supply chain for the vital work that they are doing to protect the nation?

Simon Hart: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in that tribute. The Prime Minister and I visited Wockhardt in Wrexham a few weeks ago to see the fantastic work that it is doing. Hers, like so many stories, is a story of a successful Union. As we all know, the vaccine roll-out is not a competition between Governments; it is a competition between Government and covid, and the Union is central to that.

Mr Hollobone: The logistical expertise of Her Majesty's armed forces is second to none. What role are defence personnel playing in the vaccine roll-out in Wales?

Simon Hart: The short answer is: a pivotal role. It has been a joy to behold the unbelievable enthusiasm, dedication and professionalism in Wales and across the rest of the UK from servicemen and women. We are regularly receiving requests from the Welsh Government for additional support, and we turn that support around in Cardiff just as soon as we can.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) [V]: The mid-February target to vaccinate Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation priority groups 1 to 4 involves offering a dose to all those who are considered clinically extremely vulnerable. What discussions is my right hon. Friend having with the Welsh Government regarding the accuracy of data being used in relation to this group?

Simon Hart: As my hon. Friend might imagine, there are regular discussions across all levels of government around data accuracy and the progress that we can make with this particular challenge. He is right to point out that it is, of course, a devolved issue. We are trying to ensure that we can find solutions to issues of a more permanent nature—perhaps persistent data problems, for example—but the ambition remains to get absolutely everybody in those cohorts done within the timescale, and we are currently on target to achieve that.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): What recent discussions he has had with (a) the Welsh Government and (b) Cabinet colleagues on the UK shared prosperity fund. [911546]

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the First Minister of Wales on the UK shared prosperity fund. [911565]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has regular discussions with the First Minister and Welsh Ministers on a range of issues, including the UK shared prosperity fund. The Government will continue to engage with the Welsh Government as we develop the fund's investment framework for publication.

Jonathan Edwards [V]: From the figures that I have seen, the British Government may have conflated overrun spend from the previous convergence period for this financial year with the actual allocation of new money. Under the previous scheme, Wales would receive nearly £400 million per annum. Is not the reality that the Minister is unable to guarantee that the shared prosperity fund, when fully operational, will match that level of

investment? Why will he not just admit that the communities that both the Secretary of State and I represent in Carmarthenshire are about to get fleeced?

David T. C. Davies: The figures will show that on average Wales is receiving £375 million a year. What the hon. Gentleman may be referring to is the fact that over a number of years to follow there will still be some money coming to Wales from the European Union. Of course, it is absolutely right that that money should be counted towards the £375 million total, and the Government will guarantee to ensure that the amount of money to be spent in Wales in future will be exactly the same, or higher, than the amount that was spent previously.

Wayne David [V]: Britain has left the European Union. The transition period has come to an end. There is no new money coming from the structural funds. Given that the Government announced the shared prosperity fund back in 2017, can the Minister at least tell us the timetable for the introduction of the new fund?

David T. C. Davies: We have already made it very clear and demonstrated that the amount of money that is going to be spent in Wales when the SPF comes in will be identical to or higher than the amount of money that was spent in Wales that came from the European Union. There has been absolutely no secrecy about that. The way in which the fund will be managed is subject to discussions at this very moment, and I would expect full details to be publicised over the next few months.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab) [V]: Many of my constituents are very sorry to see the hundreds of millions of pounds of EU funding that Wales received in recent years come to an end. Our departure from the EU made this inevitable, and of course I accept this, but they also believe that the Welsh Government should have full autonomy over their part of the shared prosperity fund, and I agree, so can the Minister provide some evidence that this working together is taking place?

David T. C. Davies: I am sure that the hon. Lady's constituents will be delighted to know that hundreds of millions of pounds will continue to be spent in Wales, and continue to be spent where it is most needed. I am sure that her constituents would be rather disappointed that we already know from the Audit Wales report that some of the money that has gone into, for example, pillar 2 agricultural funding has not been well spent. I urge her to recommend to her constituents that they look at the dossier presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams), which demonstrates that millions of pounds of European Union money that was handled by the Welsh Government was misspent. When that money becomes British taxpayers' money, all partners in British Government, including the Welsh Government and local authorities with growth deals, will want to make sure that it is properly spent, and I am sure that her constituents will agree.

Covid-19: Employment Support

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on support for people in Wales whose employment has been adversely affected by the covid-19 outbreak. [911548]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): I have regular discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on our support for people affected by covid-19. The UK Government have funded the furlough of 8,900 employees and provided over £17 million to the self-employed in the hon. Lady's own constituency.

Beth Winter [V]: The pandemic has exposed inadequacies in our welfare system to act as a safety net, from the insufficient level of statutory sick pay to the damaging impact of the two-child benefit limit on families. The idea of a universal basic income is gaining increasing traction as a solution to many of these issues, and there is increasing support in Wales and elsewhere for a UBI pilot funded by the UK Government. Will the Minister express his support for such a pilot and call on the UK Government to fund it?

David T. C. Davies: The UK Government have already provided £5 million of extra funding to the Welsh Government to ensure that they have adequate funds to support businesses and individuals who have been affected by the covid pandemic, and of course the Welsh Government also have tax-raising powers. The reality is that this Government have spent hundreds of billions of pounds supporting businesses and individuals throughout this country, such is our commitment to ensuring that no one is left out as a result of the impact of this terrible pandemic.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab) [V]: The last year has been immensely challenging for many Welsh families, who have seen their lives completely upended by the virus. Despite welcome progress on vaccinations, the pandemic is not going away overnight, and many still feel grave uncertainty about the future of their jobs and their family finances, so why do the Government think that now is the time to cut universal credit by £1,000 a year, hitting more than 200,000 Welsh families who are doing their best to get by?

David T. C. Davies: I have not yet been promoted to the Treasury, and I cannot possibly predict what might happen in the Budget that may or may not come in a few months' time. Perhaps the hon. Lady knows something that the rest of us do not, but I can tell her that the Government have been steadfast in their commitment to supporting all those who have been left out. May I just point out that we will come through this crisis quickly as a result of the Government's wise decision not to take part in the European Union vaccination scheme, which is why we have now vaccinated 14% of the population of the United Kingdom?

Nia Griffith [V]: Anyone who took the initiative and started their own business within a year of the pandemic hitting was completely shut out of the self-employment income support scheme when it was announced last March. Many turned to universal credit as their only option. Now, nearly a year on, and with last year's tax returns submitted to HMRC, will the Government think again, close the gaps in support and give the newly self-employed the help that they deserve?

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Lady knows very well that I am not responsible for the policies of the Treasury, but I simply point to the fact that we have provided

more than £9.3 billion of additional support through the welfare system for people affected by covid, including the £20 a week increase in the universal credit standard allowance. The Government's commitment to supporting all those who have been affected by this pandemic is very clear to all.

Fiscal Settlement

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the adequacy of the fiscal settlement. [911549]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): We have provided £16.8 billion to the devolved Administrations to fight coronavirus, including £5.2 billion to the Welsh Government and £8.6 billion to the Scottish Government. We have also secured vaccines for all four nations, demonstrating the importance of the Union and how we are stronger together.

Owen Thompson: The fiscal settlement of this disunited kingdom means that the Treasury continues to impose unfair, unreasonable and inexplicable limits on the devolved nations' borrowing powers. That has meant that at every step throughout the covid crisis, the devolved nations have had to wait for the Treasury to announce financial support before they could do the same. The next challenge is climate action, and with evidence from the Dasgupta review and the Committee on Climate Change showing how far we still have to go, will the Government now ensure that the devolved nations are fully equipped to meet this challenge by devolving borrowing powers?

David T. C. Davies: I would have thought that the Scottish people, with their reputation for understanding the importance of money, would be quite pleased that the UK Government have provided £8.2 billion of extra funding for the Scottish Parliament, rather than expecting it to borrow money and pay it back at some point. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman might like to familiarise himself with the report from the London School of Economics this morning, which suggested that independence for Scotland would end up costing every Scottish taxpayer thousands of pounds a year, in addition to the £8 billion that they would have lost as a result, as the UK Government would not have provided that extra money to the Scottish Parliament.

Welsh Lamb Exports

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote exports of Welsh lamb around the world. [911550]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): The UK Government have taken significant steps to support and promote Welsh lamb exports around the world. That includes securing a tariff-free, quota-free deal with the EU and securing the protection of the Welsh lamb geographical indicator as part of the Japan deal.

Theresa Villiers: Rules on international trade require sanitary and phytosanitary rules to be based on risk and science, so will the Government put immediate pressure on the European Union to lift the unreasonable compliance requirements it is imposing on British food

exports? They are disproportionate, given that our food standards and rules are among the very toughest in the whole world.

Simon Hart: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, particularly in her last point, and I can offer that guarantee. We are in regular contact with our colleagues in the EU about this specific point, and there are meetings later this week involving the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on this and related issues.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Lamb exporters in west Wales have raised concerns about the delays they are facing at EU ports, reporting that some shipments have been held by customs officials for two to three days because of to the supposed issues with animal export health certificates. Can the Secretary of State enlighten us as to whether he expects an urgent resolution to this problem?

Simon Hart: I do not know how "urgent" would be defined in the EU at the moment, but certainly there is an urgency to resolve some of these problems. As I have mentioned, there are some teething issues that can be resolved quite quickly. If there are longer-term structural issues, they need to be looked at in more detail. I have sheep farming interests in my constituency, as does the hon. Member, and it is worth pointing out that there are some big opportunities across the rest of the world that we should be exploring, rather than necessarily just concentrating on some of the difficulties with the EU.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Welsh lamb is a premium product that is wanted across the world. Welshpool livestock market, which is usually the heart of my farming community, is quieter because of covid, but the sheep meat prices are still robust. Will the Secretary of State meet me, farmers and slaughterhouses in Montgomeryshire to discuss the health certificates and the wider SPS issues on the EU border, which are clearly out of order?

Simon Hart: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend and his constituents; I used to live in his constituency, so I know some of them quite well. He is right to raise this issue. One of the companies in question is meeting the Cabinet Office later this week; that is progress. I am delighted that Welshpool mart has done some good business. I see that lamb prices have increased by around 17% in 2021, and consumer spending was £652 million, but the rest-of-the-world opportunities that I mentioned—particularly the Gulf, the middle east and the US, once we get the small ruminant rule resolved—will help the lamb industry across Wales and the UK.

Apprentices: Wales Office

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What steps he is taking to employ more apprentices in the Wales Office. [911552]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): The Wales Office recognises the importance of apprenticeships and the opportunity they provide. We have funded dedicated apprenticeship roles since 2011 and continue to be fully committed to the apprenticeship scheme.

Robert Halfon [V]: Will my right hon. Friend outline what progress the Welsh Government have made towards meeting the public sector apprenticeship target of 2.3%, and what progress frontline services in Wales such as the police have made on offering apprenticeships to their employees?

Simon Hart: I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has raised this point. The public sector apprenticeship target is applicable only to bodies in England, but he raises a critical point about devolution. We are concerned that, for example, Welsh police forces are paying into the apprenticeship levy scheme but not getting anything out of it because the Welsh Government do not support police apprenticeships. I suggest that it would be very interesting for his Committee to look at why Welsh forces are paying in but getting nothing out the other end by way of apprenticeships.

EU-UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement on Wales. [911553]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): We have agreed a deal that provides Welsh business with exceptional access to the EU market. It is the first time ever that the EU has agreed a zero-tariff, zero-quota deal.

Stephen Crabb [V]: Getting the Brexit deal across the line before the end of the year was important, and huge credit is due to the Government for securing it, but we have a serious situation emerging at Welsh ports, with freight levels way down on where they should be. Will my right hon. Friend work urgently with ministerial colleagues, HMRC and trade bodies to find simpler solutions to the problem of checks and paperwork, which risks making the UK land bridge more costly and less attractive for trade between Ireland and the continent?

Simon Hart: As my right hon. Friend knows, I am in touch with Pembroke, Fishguard and Holyhead about this issue, and we are trying to make a distinction between what we can assign to covid changes in business and the other, more permanent factors that he refers to. There are some complications to do with port infrastructure, which is the responsibility of the Welsh Government. We have meetings tomorrow to try to push the Welsh Government to get that process under way more quickly. We have discussions with road hauliers about the land bridge. I assure him that we want this business to return to as near as possible as soon as possible, and I am happy to work with him and others to achieve that goal.

SPEAKER'S STATEMENT

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I want to express, on behalf of the whole House, our deep sadness at the death of Captain Sir Tom Moore. His dignity and determination in raising money to support NHS charities caught the nation's mood at the most difficult time. He exemplified the best of our values. I know the whole House will want to join me in sending our condolences to his family and his many friends. I invite Members to join me for a minute's silence to commemorate Sir Tom's life, and to pay our respects to those who have lost their lives as a result of covid and their families and friends.

12 noon

The House observed a one-minute silence.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

[911904] **Claire Hanna** (Belfast South) (SDLP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 3 February.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Captain Sir Tom Moore—or Captain Tom, as we all came to know him—dedicated his life to serving his country and others. His was a long life lived well, whether during his time defending our nation as an Army officer or, last year, bringing the country together through his incredible fundraising drive for the NHS that gave millions a chance to thank the extraordinary men and women of our NHS who have protected us in this pandemic. As Captain Tom repeatedly reminded us, “Please remember, tomorrow will be a good day”. He inspired the very best in us all, and his legacy will continue to do so for generations to come. We now all have the opportunity to show our appreciation for him and all that he stood for and believed in, and that is why I encourage everyone to join in a national clap for Captain Tom and all those health workers for whom he raised money at 6 pm this evening.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Claire Hanna [V]: I certainly echo those words about Captain Tom, a decent and inspiring man.

The Social Democratic and Labour party has warned for the last five years about the destabilising impact Brexit would have on Northern Ireland, though we take no pleasure in the disruption or in the injury some feel to their British identity. The last few days have seen a rash decision—thankfully withdrawn—by the European Commission, which was condemned by all parties here and both Governments and which, unfortunately, was followed by sporadic criminal behaviour and threats. Will the Prime Minister, in affirming the rule of law in Northern Ireland, consider seriously the impact of their words, and work together through the available structures to ensure that the new arrangements work for everybody in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady that it was most regrettable that the EU should seem to cast doubt on the Good Friday agreement and the principles of the peace process by seeming to call for a border across the island of Ireland. I can tell her that we will work to ensure that there are no such borders—we will respect the peace process—and, indeed, no barriers down the Irish sea, and that the principle of unfettered access across all parts of our United Kingdom is upheld.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I join the whole House in paying tribute to Captain Sir Tom Moore, who was indeed an inspiration to all of us, a beacon of light at a time of darkness and a true gentleman.

I am sure my right hon. Friend is aware that my ten-minute rule Bill would increase the maximum penalty for death by dangerous driving to life imprisonment.

The policy and the Bill have cross-party support. The policy has Government support; the Bill does not. The Government say they will introduce the policy in their sentencing Bill, of which we have as yet seen no sign. So, will the Government now give Government time to my Bill to ensure that this necessary change is put on the statute book as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend, and she is absolutely right to campaign for punishments that fit the crime; we are therefore bringing forward exactly those changes in our forthcoming sentencing Bill. Our proposals will, I believe, go as far as, if not even further than, those that she wants by raising the maximum penalty for causing death by careless driving when under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and they will tighten the law for those who cause serious injury by careless driving.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I join you, Mr Speaker, and the Prime Minister in sending my condolences to the family of Captain Sir Tom Moore? He perhaps more than anyone embodied the spirit of Britain; he will be sadly missed, and I welcome the initiative that the Prime Minister spoke of for a clap this evening. Our thoughts are also with the family of Maureen Colquhoun, the first openly lesbian MP and a great champion of women's rights.

Let me pay tribute to our NHS and all those on the frontline who are delivering the vaccine. Today we are likely to hit 10 million vaccinations, which is remarkable. The biggest risk to the vaccine programme at the moment is the arrival of new variants, such as the South African variant. On that issue, the Government's own scientists in the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies said two weeks ago that

"only a complete pre-emptive closure of borders or the mandatory quarantine of all visitors upon arrival can get close to fully preventing new cases or new variants."

That is pretty clear, so why did the Prime Minister choose not to do the one thing that SAGE said could prevent new variants coming to the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: Actually, SAGE did not recommend a complete ban and says that a travel ban should not be relied upon to stop the importation of new variants, but we do have one of the toughest regimes in the world. Anybody coming from South Africa not only has to do a test before they come here, but anybody now coming from South Africa—a British citizen coming from South Africa now—will find themselves obliged to go into quarantine for 10 days, and will have an isolation assurance agency checking up on them. It is illegal now to go on holiday in this country; it is illegal to travel from South Africa or all the countries on the current red list, and we will be going forward with a plan to ensure that people coming into this country from those red list countries immediately have to go into Government-mandated quarantine hospitality.

Keir Starmer: I am intrigued by the Prime Minister's answer. I do not think he disputes what SAGE's view was—that only a complete closure or comprehensive quarantine of all arrivals will work. He does not seem to dispute that; he says it simply was not a recommendation. I ask the Prime Minister to publish the full SAGE minutes so we can see what was said in full; or, if there is some other advice, perhaps he can publish that.

The situation is this: we know that the South African variant is spreading across England, and measures are in place to try to deal with that. We also know that other variants are out there in other parts of the world. Just as a matter of common sense, is the Prime Minister really saying that quarantining all arrivals would make no difference to fighting new variants of the virus, or is he saying that quarantining all arrivals at the border would make a difference but it is too difficult?

The Prime Minister: This is the right hon. and learned Gentleman who only recently said that quarantine measures are "a blunt instrument" and whose shadow Transport Secretary said that quarantine should be "lessened". We have one of the toughest regimes in the world. When the right hon. and learned Gentleman calls for a complete closure of borders, or suggests that that might be an option, he should be aware that 75% of our medicines come into this country from the European continent, as does 45% of our food, and 250,000 businesses in this country rely on imports. It is not practical completely to close off this country as he seems to be suggesting. What is practical is to have one of the toughest regimes in the world and to get on with vaccinating the people of this country, which is what we are doing.

Keir Starmer: What the Prime Minister says about the Labour position is complete nonsense; he knows it. It is 3 February 2021; with new variants in the country, our schools are shut and our borders are open. Everybody knows there are exceptions whatever the quarantine regime. Everybody knows that. That is not what this question is about.

The position is this: 21,000 people are coming into this country every day. The Prime Minister's new border arrangements are still weeks away from being implemented and will only affect direct flights from some countries. We know from the first wave of the pandemic that only 0.1% of virus cases came from China, where we had restrictions, whereas 62% came indirectly from France and Spain, where there were no restrictions. Why does the Prime Minister think that the variants of the virus will behave differently and arrive in the UK only by direct flights?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman cannot have it both ways. He simultaneously says that he wants the borders to be kept open for freight reasons or to allow businesses to carry on as now—I think that was what he was saying—while calling for tougher quarantine measures, which is exactly what this Government imposed as soon as we became aware of the new variant.

I repeat what someone has to do if they want to come into this country from abroad. Seventy-two hours before they fly, they have to get a test. They have to have a passenger locator form; they are kicked off the plane if they do not have it. They then have to spend 10 days in quarantine. If they come from one of the red list countries, they have to go straight into quarantine. All that, of course, is to allow us to get on with the vaccination programme. If we had listened to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, we would still be at the starting blocks, because he wanted to stay in the European Medicines Agency and said so four times from that Dispatch Box.

Keir Starmer: Complete nonsense. Don't let the truth get in the way of a pre-prepared gag: the Prime Minister knows that I have never said that, from this Dispatch Box or anywhere else, but the truth escapes him. He describes the current arrangements. If they were working, the variant—the single biggest threat to the vaccine system—would not be in the country.

Let me turn to another area where the Government have been slow to act: the cladding crisis. This is affecting millions of people, and I cannot tell the Prime Minister how anxious and angry people feel about it. It is now three and a half years since the Grenfell tragedy, which took 72 lives. Can the Prime Minister tell the House and the country why, three and a half years on, there are still hundreds of thousands of people living in homes with unsafe cladding, and why millions of leaseholders are in homes that they cannot sell and are facing extortionate costs?

The Prime Minister: In respect of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's last answer, may I advise him to consult YouTube, where he will find an answer?

The right hon. and learned Gentleman raises a very important point about cladding and the predicament of some leaseholders—many leaseholders—and he is absolutely right that this is a problem that needs to be fixed. This Government are getting on with it. On 95% of the high-rise buildings with unsafe ACM cladding, work is either complete or under way to remove that cladding. I very much appreciate and sympathise with the predicament of leaseholders who are in that situation, but we are working to clear the backlog, and I can tell him that my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Communities Secretary will be coming forward with a full package to address the issue.

Keir Starmer: Whatever the Prime Minister claims is being done is not working, because this is the situation. Through no fault of their own, huge numbers of people, especially leaseholders, are stuck in the middle. They are living in unsafe homes. They cannot sell and they are being asked to foot the bill. That is the situation they are in. Take, for example, Will Martin. He is a doctor who has a flat in Sheffield. He has been spending his days on the frontline fighting covid in the NHS. He spends his nights worrying about the £52,000 bill that he now has to pay for fire safety repairs. He does not want future promises, Prime Minister. He does not want to hear that it has all been sorted when he knows that it has not. He wants to know, here and now: will he or will he not have to pay that £52,000 bill?

The Prime Minister: We are determined that no leaseholder should have to pay for the unaffordable costs of fixing safety defects that they did not cause and are no fault of their own. That is why, in addition to the £1.6 billion we are putting in to remove the HPL—high-pressure laminate—cladding, we have also set up a £1 billion building safety fund that has already processed over almost 3,000 claims. I sympathise very much with Dr Martin, the gentleman the right hon. and learned Gentleman mentions, and I hope very much that his particular case can be addressed in the course of the forthcoming package that will be produced by my right hon. Friends.

Keir Starmer: There are thousands and thousands of people in exactly the same position. I spoke to leaseholders caught in the middle of this on Monday. One of them was Hayley. She has already gone bankrupt, Prime Minister. She is 27. She bought a flat, she has lost it and she is now bankrupt. It is too late for her. Those leaseholders I spoke to had three very simple asks. This is what they want: immediate up-front funding for unsafe blocks; a deadline of next year to make buildings safe; and protection for leaseholders. We put those forward for a vote on Monday. The Prime Minister says he is determined to do something about it. What did he do? He ordered his MPs to abstain. If the Prime Minister is serious about moving this forward and ending this injustice, will he commit today to those simple asks from leaseholders?

The Prime Minister: We are getting on with the job of helping leaseholders across the country by remediating their buildings. In addition to the funds I have already mentioned, I can tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman that we are also introducing a £30 million fund to install alarms and other interim measures. We are making it very clear to the mortgage industry that they should support people living in such accommodation, and making it clear to all sectors in the industry that people living in such homes should not be tied up in the whole EWS1 process. That will benefit about 450,000 homeowners. I think he is right to raise the problem, but we are getting on with addressing it.

We are getting on with addressing the fundamental problem that afflicts this country and that is the covid pandemic. That is why I am pleased we have now done 10 million first vaccinations across the country. I repeat, Mr Speaker, that had we listened to the right hon. and learned Gentleman we would be stuck at go. He is shaking his head, but he can check the record. Several times he said that this country should remain in the European Medicines Agency. If he wishes he can, on a point of order, correct me. He said it was wrong just now. I think he should study the record and he will find that that is exactly what he did.

We want to get this country safe again. We want schools to come back. The right hon. and learned Gentleman continues to refuse to say that schools are not safe. On the contrary, he spends his time looking at Labour focus groups, who tell him that he should stop sitting on the fence—

Mr Speaker: Order. In fairness, Prime Minister, we have to be somewhere near the question that was asked. I do not want you to go around answering every problem and issue. There are a lot more questions that will allow you to do that and the first one is from Marco Longhi.

[911905] **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): I join the Prime Minister in his moving words about Captain Sir Tom Moore, who was an inspiration to each and every one of us in this country and beyond.

The Priory Park boxing club in Dudley has produced many champions, including Ryan Aston, who became champion five times in this country. Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to Paul Gough at the club, who is working with young boys and girls who have been excluded from mainstream education? Will he also pay tribute to the council leader Patrick Harley, who

has agreed to and is supporting a new school, in partnership with the club, to ensure that these young people will get academic qualifications as well as increased strength, belief and new opportunities for the future?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this excellent club. I am happy to join him in paying tribute to the work of Paul Gough and Patrick Harley, and everybody at Priory Park boxing club. I know from personal experience what a huge difference it can make, not just to young people's fitness, but to their educational success, to attend boxing clubs.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: May I associate myself with your remarks, Mr Speaker, about the remarkable gentleman Captain Sir Tom Moore and everything that he has done? He has been an inspiration to each and every one of us and I send my condolences to his family and friends.

Last week, we told the Prime Minister that it was wrong for him to visit Scotland in the middle of a pandemic. We told him that it was a non-essential visit. This morning, the *Daily Record* newspaper revealed that the Prime Minister knew that the Livingston plant that he was visiting had an outbreak of 14 covid cases just 24 hours earlier. There are serious questions to answer. Did the Prime Minister and his advisers know about the covid outbreak? When did they know, and when did the Prime Minister make the irresponsible decision to go ahead with what was a PR stunt?

The Prime Minister: I can think of few things more important than to see the roll-out of the vaccination programme across this country, to encourage the wonderful companies who are doing great work across the whole of Scotland and to see the commitment of those Scottish scientists to helping us all to defeat the pandemic. It was fantastic to talk to them. I would just repeat that the Government remain, as I said yesterday, very willing to help Scotland with the roll-out of vaccines across the whole of the UK.

Ian Blackford: There is the wow factor once again with the Prime Minister. What an absolute shambles that he has gone to a plant where there was a covid outbreak. The Prime Minister cannot just explain away this absolutely shocking error of judgment. Anyone can see that his campaign trip to Scotland was utterly reckless. The *Daily Record* story is very clear. The Prime Minister and his advisers knew there was a serious covid outbreak at this plant. They knew the visit posed a risk, but they made a deliberate choice. They made the irresponsible choice. The Prime Minister put politics before public health. Prime Minister, why be so reckless? Is it any wonder that people in Scotland have no faith in this Prime Minister? Is not he the worst possible leader at the worst possible time?

The Prime Minister: I think what the people of Scotland want to see is the whole country pulling together and working to develop the vaccine, as that fantastic plant in Scotland is doing. One of the advantages of the Valneva vaccine is that it may be able to combat all sorts of variants in a very comprehensive way. It is amazing and wonderful to see Scottish scientists working to do that. I had a fantastic time. Nobody, by the way, raised that issue with me before or since, and it is my job to visit every part of this country. Nothing and no one is

going to stop me, and I am very, very proud of the Government's record in rolling out the vaccine. As I say, the offer remains open to the Scottish nationalist party. We are there—[*Interruption.*] Scottish National party—if they insist, though they are also nationalists, Mr Speaker. We are there to help the roll-out of the vaccine and do more, were they to decide that is necessary.

[911909] **Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): Closing the attainment gap has always been at the heart of our education policy, yet we know that the pandemic is having a devastating effect on our children's education. I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to prioritise the opening of our schools, but would he also agree that we must put the catch-up of children's missed education at the centre of our recovery programme?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. Of all the challenges now facing the country, the single most important is remedying the damage to children's education. Yes, of course, we have to clear up the backlog in the NHS and we have problems in the courts, but it is education that is going to be the focus of this Government, and repairing the differential learning that has taken place during the crisis.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance) [V]: We need to be open and honest on the reasons why the Northern Ireland protocol exists, but also do all we can to make its implementation as easy as possible. So in that spirit, in the talks with the EU that will take place over the coming days, will the Prime Minister make it a priority to seek a UK-EU veterinary agreement? That would help in respect of the Northern Ireland protocol and also help all UK food exporters.

The Prime Minister: We think it is very important that the protocol should not place unnecessary barriers—or barriers of any kind—down the Irish sea. As I said to a colleague earlier, I think it was most unfortunate that the EU seemed to want to impose a barrier across the island of Ireland. We seek to make sure there are no such barriers down the Irish sea.

[911911] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con) [V]: Some of my constituents had their Christmases ruined because the heavy rainfall and local inappropriate development caused foul water to enter their homes, causing them great difficulties. Will the Prime Minister appoint a statutory body with the specific and undeniable responsibility of ensuring that no development can automatically tap into existing drainage systems, and that before developments begin, a full assessment is made of the local drainage capacity and if that capacity would be inadequate, the development does not begin until the infrastructure is upgraded?

The Prime Minister: I will study the very interesting proposals that my hon. Friend makes, but in the meantime I will raise them particularly with the Environment Agency, which does a fantastic job in managing local areas that are prone to flooding and putting in the necessary defences. I know that colleagues across the House will have seen the work of the Environment Agency across the country, and we are making another £5.2 billion investment in traditional flood defences, which I know will benefit my hon. Friend's constituents in Gloucestershire and across the country.

[911906] **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Streatham) (Lab): The Prime Minister was not born in this country, and my parents were not born in this country; I was, but we are all British. There are, however, hundreds of thousands of children, including in my constituency, who, like us, were born or raised here and are entitled to citizenship but are being priced out by the £1,012 fee. Without citizenship, they face barriers to university, work, healthcare, renting a home or opening a bank account. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is wrong that the Government make a 60% profit on these applications, and will he take steps to reduce or even end citizenship fees for children?

The Prime Minister: British citizenship is a wonderful thing, and it is fantastic that so many EU nationals have taken up the opportunity to become British in the course of the last few years. I am interested in the point that the hon. Lady makes and I will study it, but clearly there are costs that must be borne by the taxpayer. I think she will appreciate that citizenship at any time of life is a very considerable prize and worth investing in.

[911912] **Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): The police are one of our public services that has been absolutely essential during the pandemic, so will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the fact that the Kent police and crime commissioner, Matthew Scott, has announced another 145 police officers during this year, bringing the total to 800 extra police on the streets of Kent? Most importantly, this has been accompanied by a reduction of 17,000 in the crime numbers in Kent this year.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend, who is a long-standing and redoubtable campaigner for law and order and for the police. I also congratulate the PCC, Matthew Scott, on what he is doing to back the police and to recruit more police in Kent. That is why we are putting another 20,000 more officers on the streets of this country, and I think we have already recruited about 6,000.

[911907] **Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab) [V]: Last week, the Government responded to concerns from our care workers by stating:

“We are immensely proud of all our care workers do”.

That is a sentiment we all share, yet in the very same statement the Government sought to pass the buck for the way our care workers have been treated by saying:

“The vast majority of care workers are employed by private sector providers”

and that

“the Government does not set levels of pay for care workers”.

Why will this Government not commit to ensuring that our care workers are paid a wage they can live on?

The Prime Minister: This Government are proud of not only setting up the national living wage, but making sure we had record-breaking increases both last year and this year. That is the most important thing we can do for care workers and workers across the country.

[911915] **Joy Morrissey** (Beaconsfield) (Con) [V]: I thank the Prime Minister for prioritising schools during this pandemic. Will he confirm that that remains the case?

In Children’s Mental Health Week, will he work with parents and frontline children’s charities to minimise the disruption to children and their mental health caused by this pandemic?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what she does to champion this very, very important cause. It is Children’s Mental Health Week this week, and partly in recognition of the extent of the problem and the issue across the whole of the country, we have announced a new youth mental health ambassador, Dr Alex George, who will be working with the Government to underline the importance of mental health resilience and making everybody in our country better able to deal with some of the problems that life throws in our way.

[911908] **Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP) [V]: May I, too, express condolences to the family of Captain Sir Tom Moore, an inspirational and wonderful gentleman?

Prime Minister, you say that your commitment to Northern Ireland is “unshakeable”. I speak for all of my constituents today when I tell you that the protocol has betrayed us and has made us feel like foreigners in our own country. Tea and sympathy will not cut the mustard, so, Prime Minister, what are you actually going to do when you realise that the EU will do nothing to help Northern Ireland? Will you use all of the instruments at your disposal? Will you use, if necessary, your parliamentary majority? Will you legislate, if necessary, to remove the impediments to trade in Northern Ireland? Will you be a man of your word and allow businessmen in my constituency to bin the unnecessary documentation that you told us we could bin? Prime Minister, be the Unionist we need you to be.

The Prime Minister: I utterly share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration about the way in which the EU, particularly the EU Commission, temporarily seemed to use the protocol in such a way as to impose a border, contrary to the spirit of the Good Friday agreement—contrary to the letter of the Good Friday agreement. We will do everything we need to do, whether legislatively or indeed by invoking article 16 of the protocol, to ensure that there is no barrier down the Irish sea and that the hon. Gentleman’s business constituents, some of whom I know very well and admire very much, can continue to do business, unfettered, between Northern Ireland and the rest of this country.

[911917] **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his calm handling of the European Commission’s misbehaviour over vaccines and Northern Ireland? Nevertheless, we can learn something from our European friends. Andalusia, a Spanish province of 8 million people, had a covid death rate of about 190 deaths per million in November—higher than ours at the time. After giving activated vitamin D—calcifediol—to care home residents and some GP patients, that death rate almost halved, whilst ours was doubling. Will he ask his advisers to look urgently again at the very latest Spanish research about that cheap, safe and apparently effective treatment?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. We will continue to monitor all the evidence about the efficacy of vitamin D and the treatment that

he mentions. I am well aware of it; indeed, we have discussed it before personally. I will keep him updated on the review that is taking place.

[911910] **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab) [V]: Skelmersdale residents believe that they are an island of forgotten people. It is a '60s new town, with very poor public transport and one of the lowest levels of car and vehicle ownership. For many, the only means of getting to doctors, schools or shops or visiting loved ones is through some of the 87 underpasses, many of which flood every time there is rain. Will the right hon. Gentleman ask his officials to work with Lancashire County Council to find and fund a permanent—and I do mean permanent—solution, which does not involve providing canoes?

The Prime Minister: I appreciate the desire of the hon. Lady to find a solution. I am aware of the problem she refers to and the flooding in the tunnels. We will certainly work with Lancashire County Council to mitigate the problem—to sort it out. To repeat: we have the funds available and will make sure that it is done.

[911918] **Mark Jenkinson** (Workington) (Con): We were delighted to hear that Maryport, in my constituency of Workington, was successful in our bid for the future high streets fund, one of my right hon. Friend's 50 additional towns announced last August—a bid that I led when I was deputy leader of Allerdale Borough Council. We are hoping, too, for a positive outcome to our towns fund bid for Workington. May I take the opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend for all he is doing for my constituents and in levelling up across the United Kingdom, and invite him, as soon as he is able, to visit my constituency to see for himself its potential?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a fantastic advocate for the people of Workington and never fails to put their interests before me. I will do everything I can to help him and will check my diary commitments to see when I can get there. I hope it will be as soon as possible.

[911913] **Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC) [V]: The delivery of important letters, packets and parcels in the Caernarfon area has been delayed for days and weeks by a covid outbreak amongst local postal workers. The Prime Minister will, I am sure, join me in wishing my constituents a speedy recovery, but what are his Government doing, during this health crisis, to ensure that the once world-beating but now privatised Royal Mail is sufficiently robust to fulfil its duty to the public, particularly in rural areas?

The Prime Minister: I pass on my sympathies to all those affected by the outbreak of covid that the hon. Gentleman describes. The most important thing we can do is continue to roll out the vaccination programme. We want to get to key workers, such as postal workers, as fast as we possibly can. We are already at 10 million across the whole country. We have got to get through JCVI groups 1 to 9, the most vulnerable groups. Postal workers over 50 will certainly be included in those. After that, we want to get down to all key workers who come into regular contact with others who may be exposed to the virus.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con) [V]: The Prime Minister will be aware that the second wave of coronavirus has had a significant impact on the mental wellbeing of frontline nurses and doctors, with many in critical care units facing continuous shifts with dismal survival rates, causing a level of psychological harm that may result in post-traumatic stress disorder. With that in mind, will he look at utilising the military understanding of that condition, and urgently invest in training sufficient numbers of psychology professionals to support our heroic nurses and doctors fighting on the frontline of this battle against covid-19?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point about PTSD in the NHS, and NHS staff, who do an amazing job treating us all. I will certainly look at the particular recommendation that she now makes; but clearly, as part of the £52 billion package of investment in the NHS that we have been making in the last year, we will be ensuring that we support the mental health of staff working on the frontline, and making sure that they have all the health and wellbeing helplines, all the advice and counselling, that they need to get through what has been, for all of them, a really difficult time.

[911914] **Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP) [V]: Yesterday, the Scottish Government announced that they would go further than the Prime Minister and introduce a comprehensive system of supervised quarantine for those entering the country. It is evidently clear that countries that have employed effective international quarantine measures are now reaping the rewards of reopening their economies and reducing the unnecessary loss of life. Faced with the overwhelming evidence that importing new cases of variants could undermine our efforts again, why is the Prime Minister watching, waiting and hoping for the best, when we know that his dithering on crucial decisions has already had catastrophic consequences?

The Prime Minister: I do not think anybody wants to take any lectures on speed of roll-out or delivery of programmes from the Scottish nationalist party, but I want the hon. Lady to know that the Government will be very happy to help with accelerating the roll-out of the vaccine programme, as we said yesterday. The offer is there. The vaccination of the people of this country is the single most important thing that we need to do now, together, to beat this pandemic.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con) [V]: Millions of leaseholders are living in fear because they have no idea how safe their buildings are, and they are also facing staggering bills that they cannot afford. Can the Prime Minister assure me that leaseholders will not have to pay to fix these historic fire safety defects, and rule out loans to leaseholders, which are not a solution?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier on, we are absolutely clear that leaseholders should not have to worry about the costs of fixing historic safety defects that they did not cause. But I appreciate the sympathy and care with which my hon. Friend represents their interests.

[911916] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab) [V]: It has been estimated that 40,000 people were scammed out of their pensions in the five years after the pension freedoms took effect in 2015; attractive deals on Google or Facebook turn out all too often to be a fraud. Will the Prime Minister ensure that the planned online harms Bill tackles online financial harms, to address this very serious problem?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about online fraud, which is becoming an increasing concern of the Government. People across the country must be vigilant. As he suggests, we will look at what we can do with the online harms Bill or any other measures to protect people, particularly pensioners, against fraudsters online.

Mr Speaker: Don't forget that the Prime Minister is asking the country to get together and clap at six o'clock.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it related to Prime Minister's questions?

Mr Francois: Yes, Mr Speaker. If it assists the House, perhaps I could help to correct the record. On 31 January 2017, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) said to the House, as recorded in *Hansard*:

“Why would we want to be outside the European Medicines Agency, which ensures that all medicines in the EU market are safe and effective?”—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2017; Vol. 620, c. 827.]

Mr Speaker: Order. We are not continuing the debate. That correction will be on the record, but I am not reopening the debate.

I am suspending the House for a few minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

12.44 pm

Sitting suspended.

Support for University Students: Covid-19

12.48 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: (*Urgent Question*) To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he will make a statement on support for university students as a result of the pandemic.

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) is an assiduous campaigner for students and has spoken to me many times on the topic. I agree with him on how incredibly difficult this time has been for students, given the unprecedented disruption caused by the global pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, I have been working with the universities to prevent students from getting into hardship. We have worked with the Office for Students to allow flexibility in the spending of £256 million of student premium money, enabling it to be spent in relation to hardship, mental health and digital poverty. In December we announced an initial £20 million of additional student hardship funding, and yesterday I announced £50 million, taking the total funding available to £70 million for the remainder of this financial year. My focus as Universities Minister has always been to work with the sector to make sure that the right support gets to the students who need it the most, and the new student hardship funding will really benefit those students by putting money into their pockets.

Providers will have flexibility in how they distribute the funding to their students in a way that is best prioritised to meet the greatest needs. Given that we have asked the majority of students not to return to their university term-time accommodation in this lockdown, support might include help for students facing additional costs arising from having to maintain accommodation in more than one location, or assistance for students to access teaching remotely. The funding can be distributed to a wide population of students, including postgraduates and international students. The House can be assured that we will continue to monitor the impact this funding is having on students.

Also, because of the changing position on face-to-face teaching and the occupation of accommodation, student maintenance loan entitlement for the current term will not be reassessed if students are still incurring accommodation costs away from home. This means that students in receipt of the away-from-home loan rate will retain the maintenance loan paid at the start of the spring term.

The Government recognise that many students are facing additional mental health challenges due to the pandemic, and at every stage I have reinforced to providers the importance of prioritising mental health. I have established the higher education mental health and wellbeing working group, and I have worked with the Office for Students to provide Student Space, which has funding of up to £3 million.

I agree that the pandemic has been tough on young people, particularly students. The £70 million that we have allocated to student hardship for the remainder of this financial year will help those students who are most in need because of the pandemic.

Paul Blomfield: We agree that students are being hit by the pandemic. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for students, I spent January with Members from both sides of the House, including two of the Minister's Conservative predecessors, taking evidence from students, universities and landlords. We reported to Government saying that they should substantially increase hardship support; at least double the student premium funding of £256 million, which was intended for other purposes; enable full rent refunds for unused accommodation; and address lost education. The Government have recognised the problems, but they have failed on the solutions.

The Minister will know that, for many students, the maintenance loan does not even cover rent. They fund their studies from part-time work in hospitality and retail jobs, which have disappeared through the pandemic. The new hardship fund equates to around £26 per student in England, or the wages for half a shift in a bar job, but Wales and Scotland have provided hardship funding of around £300 and £80 per student. Does the Minister not accept that students across the country deserve the same level of support?

Many students have contracted for accommodation that they have been told not to use. The Minister has congratulated universities and providers that have offered rent rebates, but the amounts vary, and many students have received nothing. Does she accept the inequity, particularly between students in university accommodation and students in the private rented sector? What will she do beyond simply encouraging providers to do better?

The Minister's statement is silent on learning loss. Universities and their staff have worked hard to offer the very best education, but it cannot match normal learning. For some students, progression or professional qualification will be damaged. We were told of lost teaching, lost access to labs and specialist facilities, lost field trips and more, so will she commit to discussing a learning remediation fund with the Chancellor? If not, what steps will she take to ensure that today's students are not held back? Finally, will she join us in asking UK Research and Innovation to extend research studentships where needed? Will she also provide support for postgraduate research students, who are funded differently?

Students have had their education disrupted, they will enter a challenging jobs market, and they will be paying the cost of the pandemic for longer than the rest of us. They deserve better.

Michelle Donelan: As I said in my statement, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that this has been a really difficult and challenging time for students. I commend them for the resilience they have shown, and I welcome the APPG's report.

The package we announced yesterday will help thousands of students, with money going directly into the pockets of those who most need it because of the impact of the pandemic. This is £70 million for three months alone, on top of the £256 million and the additional support that universities have been giving. Yes, we do continue to urge all accommodation providers to give refunds to students, and more are doing so every day.

On catching up, my main priority is to ensure that all graduates can graduate on time with a world-class degree that can unlock their future. Of course, we will

continue to monitor the situation and ensure that students are not left in hardship as a result of the pandemic. This Government's priority remains education, and we made it so that higher education students do not have to put their academic journey or their life on hold.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for his urgent question, and I look forward to meeting him. I welcome what the Minister has said and her action to protect students. Will she wipe away bureaucracy so that students who are not getting proper quality blended learning can make representations to their university and to the Office for Students, and can be compensated if it is found that their £9,000-plus loan is not providing value for money? Will she ensure that she supports part-time distance learners with maintenance support? Will she also take the opportunity to rocket-boost degree apprenticeships to provide a ladder of opportunity for the disadvantaged, meet our skills needs and help employability at this tough time in the jobs market?

Michelle Donelan: As always, my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Education Committee remains committed to social mobility and to ensuring that no student slips down the ladder of opportunity—a passion that I share with him. I can reassure him that the Government are committed to reducing bureaucracy in our higher education sector, as well as to making our further and higher education systems much more flexible and boosting the number of degree apprenticeships.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for raising this important issue. The Minister mentioned the £50 million that she announced yesterday but can she guarantee that it is entirely new money and not recycled from a previous cut to student support? Will she confirm that it amounts to around £26 for each student studying in England, and that in Wales the Labour Government have provided an additional £300 per student? Why does she think that students in England need less support than those elsewhere in the UK?

Students face challenges that the Government's response has simply not begun to address. Many universities have done the right thing to support students with their accommodation costs, but can the Minister tell us what discussions she has had with private landlords about providing more support for students? Will she also give details of the support in place for postgraduate students?

With the majority of students learning remotely, digital access is more important than ever, but we know that many students lack such access. Can the Minister tell us how many students cannot access remote learning and what her Department is doing about that? What is she doing to make sure that all universities are making reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled students can continue their studies?

Finally, is the Minister confident that students who are struggling with their mental health can fully access all the support and services that they need? Yesterday, I met students who feel simply forgotten by the Government. Ministers' incompetent response to the pandemic has robbed them of their university experience. They are isolated at home without support, while paying for accommodation that they are forbidden to use, and

seeing their future placements, jobs and opportunities disappear. It is utterly devastating and utterly unjust, and the Minister must make it her priority to put that right.

Michelle Donelan: I can indeed confirm that this is new money. It is not right to break it down per student, because it is dedicated to those students who are most in need. The difference from the funding in Wales and Scotland is that this funding is for until the end of the financial year—in effect, just for the next three months.

This Government are concerned about digital poverty, and the Secretary of State for Education commissioned a review by the Office for Students, which is shortly to report—this month, I believe. Mental health is a priority of mine, and it is why we worked with the OfS to set up Student Space. It is why at every single stage I have reiterated the importance of mental health and wellbeing provision, and communication with university students, because this is a difficult and challenging time. Unlike the hon. Lady, who told her party activists to use the crisis a political opportunity, our priority is to ensure that the opportunities of our young people are safeguarded and that students are not left in hardship because of the pandemic.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the urgent question. Many of my constituents went off to university last year eager and in anticipation of being able to learn at world-class universities. It is welcome to hear that they have been awarded rent rebates where possible, but many of them now feel short-changed. Does the Minister agree that more pressure must be put on those universities that are failing to meet the standards of educational requirement for those students, so that value for money for all students can be delivered?

Michelle Donelan: I agree with my hon. Friend. We have made it very clear to universities that the quality, quantity and accessibility of tuition need to be maintained. I commend the work that has been done by lecturers and university support staff to achieve that goal. The Office for Students is monitoring this and I recently wrote to it to make sure that it continues to do so.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: An NUS survey has found that two thirds of students are worried about rent payments. To be clear, the £50 million that the Government have announced will not even cover a month of rent for those currently in arrears. Meanwhile, the Scottish Government have set aside six times more per student, a far more substantial £30 million for rent and hardship support. Despite that, Tories at Holyrood have continued to demand rent rebates for students. Does the Minister agree with her colleagues at Holyrood and, if so, what additional funding will she make available for those rent rebates? Students in Scotland can also give early notice on fixed-term tenancies. Will the Government introduce similar measures for students in England?

Scottish Tories have now adopted a policy of free tuition. Having seen the financial stress suffered by students throughout this pandemic, does the Minister agree that it is time for this Tory Government to adopt the policy of their Scotland branch and scrap fees for university tuition?

Michelle Donelan: The hon. Member's suggestion of scrapping fees would not put money into the pockets of students today. It would not help them with the hardship that they are facing as a result of the pandemic. Instead, that is exactly what we have done, with £70 million spread over just three months. We are also urging all accommodation providers to refund students for this period of time, so, no, we will not be adhering to her request.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that in these difficult times it is the responsibility of every university to do its best for its students? Does she also agree that, by providing campus access where appropriate, 500 new laptops, hot food deliveries to many residential students, 1,000 free bicycles for students so that they can avoid public transport and keep fit, and by operating a no-academic detriment policy and free post-graduation practicals for missed classes, the University of Bolton is setting the standard?

Michelle Donelan: I thank my hon. Friend for again highlighting to me the fantastic work that the University of Bolton is doing. Like many of our world-class universities, it has a reputation for supporting students not just with their education, but with their wellbeing. I thank all the staff at the University of Bolton for the work that they continue to do.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) [V]: The Minister announced support of £50 million, but the National Union of Students estimates that a month of rent arrears alone could account for £60 million. That does not allow for loss of employment, the cost of accessing remote education, or even just buying food. So what consultation did the Government carry out with students and representative bodies to ensure that the size and scope of this support will actually meet their needs?

Michelle Donelan: This hardship fund is on top of the £256 million that we unlocked for universities and higher education providers to utilise for this academic year, and it will help those most in need. It does not provide a blanket rent rebate. But I regularly meet students across England and from different bodies to ensure that we are giving them the support that they need.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: Many of the halls of residence of Southampton University fall within my constituency. The students there deserve and expect a quantity and quality of education that is commensurate with what they would be receiving if they had online classes. Can my hon. Friend confirm what pressure she is bringing to bear on all universities to make sure that our students are receiving the education for which they are paying?

Michelle Donelan: I agree with my right hon. Friend because online does not have to mean inferior, which is exactly why universities have invested a great deal of time and money to produce innovative and dynamic tuition. We are clear that every student deserves to receive quality, quantity and accessibility in terms of their tuition and this is being actively monitored by the Office for Students.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab) [V]: What is the Minister doing to support the many thousands of students who rely on part-time work to help them

through their university life, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds? According to the NUS survey, 9% of young people are relying on foodbanks. Although the £50 million is welcome, it is not enough. Will the Minister today commit to substantially increasing that amount so that our students can survive and thrive during this pandemic?

Michelle Donelan: I agree that we want every student to thrive throughout this pandemic, and past it. As I have said, this amount is on top of the £256 million for this academic year. We are actively monitoring the impact of this money, which only goes up to April, so that we can ensure that the best support is there for all students.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con) [V]: I welcome the funding package that the Minister unveiled yesterday. Will she confirm that she remains confident that teaching and learning environments are covid-secure for those students who do return to university? Also, in this time of heightened risk of transmission, surely it is right to reduce the numbers of people who travel to and from campus.

Michelle Donelan: My right hon. Friend touches on a really important point. We have only asked a small cohort of students to go back to university, not because face-to-face teaching is unsafe—in fact, public health information tells us that that is not the case at all—but because we are concerned about mass movement and community transmission in general. In addition, we are testing students and staff on a weekly basis, and in most universities twice a week.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab) [V]: I declare for the record that there are three people living in my house at the moment who should be away at university right now; one of them is in private accommodation, paying £150 a week for a property that they have not lived in for two months, and they have no idea when they may be able to return to it. What would the Minister tell them about why they should continue to pay rent for a property that they have no opportunity to use at the moment?

Michelle Donelan: Obviously it is a really difficult time for the hon. Member's child; I feel exceptionally sorry for them. It is one of the awful ramifications of the pandemic that they are not able to access face-to-face teaching. This Government are committed to prioritising education and getting them back as quickly as possible, in line with the road map that the Prime Minister announced last week. We have this hardship funding available for those who are most in need and those who need help. I also urge the hon. Member's loved one to contact their accommodation provider to see what flexibility it could provide.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: Many students in my North Devon constituency are facing additional costs for alternative accommodation, loss of employment or to access their university teaching online. Does my hon. Friend agree that the extra £70 million of funding that has been made available will deliver real, tangible help for students who are struggling financially as a result of the pandemic?

Michelle Donelan: Absolutely; I completely agree. That is exactly why we unlocked £256 million for this academic year, why we gave £20 million in December and why we have announced £50 million now. This will put money into the pockets of the students who are most in need as a result of the pandemic.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab) [V]: My constituents who are students have faced significant challenges with private landlords, digital access and learning generally. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) is absolutely right to ask this urgent question—thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it—and why my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) is right to say that students feel utterly forgotten. Will the Minister tell us what steps she is taking to actually listen to the experiences of students through this pandemic?

Michelle Donelan: It is vital that we listen to the experiences of students. That is why I regularly meet the NUS, and student unions in universities up and down the country. I also regularly meet the Office for Students student panel, and engage with students on a range of student media and chat forums. I will continue to do so because students need to be at the heart of our policy making and decision making, and it is their futures that we need to safeguard.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for her statement and I welcome the £70 million to alleviate student hardship. I have been contacted by several students in Hertford and Stortford about the financial struggles they face. Can my hon. Friend reaffirm what she has previously said—that universities should treat students with the care and consideration they deserve during this difficult time? What does she advise students to do if that should not seem to be the case?

Michelle Donelan: My hon. Friend is spot on: universities do have a duty of care, and it is important that they are communicating with and looking after the wellbeing of students during this challenging time. Useful information and best practice have been circulated by Universities UK and the Office for Students. If a student really does have a concern, they should raise it directly with their university, go through the complaints process and then potentially escalate it to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) [V]: Here in South Yorkshire, our two world-leading universities are doing everything they can to support students through the crisis. But writing in *The Yorkshire Post* today, the vice-chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University rightly calls for a “massive increase” in the hardship payment to up to £200 million to help those students who are struggling. What guarantees can the Minister give that further help for these disadvantaged students is on the way?

Michelle Donelan: As I have said many times today, this support is available until April. We are actively monitoring the impact on students, to ensure that every student who needs the help can get it and that they have that money in their pockets, so that they do not face challenges as the pandemic progresses.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con) [V]: The Government set the maximum amount that universities can charge for tuition fees during normal times. Is it not therefore the responsibility of Government to set the maximum amount that universities can charge during this covid-19 period, when students are not getting the education or the experience they have paid for because of Government restrictions?

Michelle Donelan: We will continue to monitor the situation. However, it is important to note that reducing tuition fees would not put money into students’ pockets here and now, and 50% of students do not pay back their loaned amount. What is important is ensuring that students get the quantity, the quality and the accessibility of tuition in these really difficult and challenging times.¹

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) [V]: A lot of students in Selly Oak live in private houses in multiple occupation, as well as purpose-built accommodation. The Guild of Students is calling for full rent rebates until the Government deem it safe to return to university and a no-penalty release from existing tenancy contracts. Does the Minister agree?

Michelle Donelan: The Prime Minister announced a road map for unlocking society and our education the other week, including getting students back from 8 March if the health information allows it; that is our priority. We urge those students who are suffering financially because they are in private accommodation and unable to access refunds to contact their university, so that they can apply for the hardship funding that we have given.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Government’s commitment of £70 million to support students impacted by this lockdown. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as the vaccine is rolled out and we are able to ease restrictions, nothing is more important than getting our undergraduates back to their universities?

Michelle Donelan: We made education a priority, which includes higher education, so that students do not have to put their academic journeys or their lives on hold, and we kept a proportion of face-to-face learning going for as long as we could. I agree with my hon. Friend: I want university students back as soon as it is safe to do so, and we have a road map laid out by the Prime Minister last week to enable us to do that.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: I declare an interest, as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary university group. Students have had a dreadful time throughout this pandemic, and they have had it from all sides. On accommodation in particular, I commend the work of the Stirling students’ union and Stirling University. Stirling University has taken the financial hit from students for empty university accommodation. What discussions has the Minister had with universities and the devolved Administrations to provide additional funding to universities to recognise the financial hit that they have taken so that students do not need to?

Michelle Donelan: Education is of course devolved, but I meet on a weekly basis with my counterpart in Scotland, Minister Lochhead. We discuss the issue of

1. [Official Report, 2 March 2021, Vol. 690, c. 2MC.]

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accommodation almost every week, and the other pressures that students are facing, in order to have a joined-up and co-ordinated approach that is really getting to the heart of the problems that universities and students are facing.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con) [V]: The £70 million support fund for students facing financial difficulties is very welcome, and I congratulate Ministers on once again stepping in to protect those most in need. However, a number of my Orpington constituents have told me how their studies have been drastically impacted by the pandemic. Will my hon. Friend update the House on what discussions have been held with universities about full or partial refunds for tuition and accommodation fees in this academic year?

Michelle Donelan: I agree with my hon. Friend: this is a really difficult and challenging time for students, and my heart goes out to all of them. We as a Government set the maximum tuition fee level, not the minimum, and it is up to universities to decide what to charge. Every single one of them has continued to charge the maximum during this pandemic, and in return we have said that we expect the quantity, quality and accessibility of provision to be there. If a student feels that it is not, there is a process whereby they can make a formal complaint to their university, and if the issue is still not resolved, they can take it to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which can potentially lead to a full or partial refund.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab) [V]: I echo the excellent point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green): it is absolutely vital that no student is disadvantaged if they choose to study outside of their home country. Yet the UK Government's recent £50 million extension designed to support students will actually leave Welsh students studying in England significantly worse off than English students studying in Wales. As a Member representing an area in Wales, I have concerns both for students at the local University of South Wales campus here in Pontypridd and constituents who are now studying across the UK. Will the Minister confirm exactly what discussions she has had with the Welsh Government about supporting Welsh students who are studying in England?

Michelle Donelan: Just to clarify, the hardship funding, at every stage, is applicable to international students, students from Wales who study here in England, and indeed Scottish students studying in England. I am happy to clarify that for all the hon. Lady's constituents who may be studying at an English university.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) [V]: I have been seeking to support a number of students in my constituency who are doing as they have been asked and staying at home but find themselves locked into tenancy agreements and paying rent on accommodation they cannot use. While it is welcome that some universities and accommodation providers are providing partial rebates to students, too many still are not. Will the Minister join me in urging all those accommodation providers to show some flexibility and provide a partial rent rebate wherever possible?

Michelle Donelan: Absolutely; I totally agree with my hon. Friend. This is a difficult time for students, and we do urge all providers of university accommodation to give a partial refund for this period in which students cannot all access their accommodation. A few that have done this so far include Warwick, Nottingham, Sheffield, LSE and Exeter—the list goes on—but we want others to contribute too.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: I was delighted to hear that the Minister has regular discussions with the devolved Education Ministers, because although it is devolved, higher education is an area where there is an interchange of students from different parts of the UK. Can she assure me that in these discussions they will look at every aspect of student life that has been detrimentally impacted by the pandemic, including mental health, finances, and the disruption to their academic results?

Michelle Donelan: In every conversation that I have with my counterparts in the DAs, we certainly do look at all the issues affecting students, and also universities, at this difficult time.

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con) [V]: I welcome the extra £50 million of funding announced yesterday for universities, which will help thousands of students facing financial difficulties because of coronavirus. Can the Minister confirm that this funding will be focused on support for the most disadvantaged students, including many from High Peak, who have been badly hit by the pandemic?

Michelle Donelan: I can, indeed. I urge all students, including those who originate from High Peak, who have been disadvantaged by the pandemic and find themselves in hardship, to approach their university and apply for this fund, which is exactly designed to target those who have found themselves in hardship and to put money in their pockets and assist them at this difficult time.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: The Minister will know of the magnificent efforts of student doctors, nurses and many other healthcare students who are working in NHS covid wards as part of their studies. I am incredibly proud of the students from the University of Hull who have stepped up in this pandemic, often moving to the frontline early and putting themselves at risk. Along with the president of Hull University Students' Union, Phoebe Bastiani, I have written to the Government asking for a reduction in healthcare students' debt to recognise their contribution to the national effort against covid-19. Will the Minister look again at this proposal?

Michelle Donelan: I could not agree more regarding the fantastic contribution that our nursing and medical students have made throughout this pandemic. We owe them so much. I work closely with the Department of Health and Social Care on this very topic. These students are eligible for payment during their placement and access to the NHS pension, and the placement also contributes towards their degree. There are no current plans by the Government to reimburse the fees for these students.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Can I ask the Minister to say a few more words about the quality of teaching that is being provided? She said in her earlier answers that the Office for Students was monitoring the quality of that education carefully. I have looked at its website, but what it does not seem to do is publish any information on what it is finding about the quality of that education. Can she update the House, based on her conversations with the Office for Students, about her assessment of the extent to which universities are maintaining the quality of the education they are delivering?

Michelle Donelan: University lecturers and university support staff have worked really hard to maintain the quality of provision, but I am under no illusions about the fact that some students feel they are not getting that quality or that quantity, and that is exactly why we have a process in place. That includes monitoring by the Office for Students, and the fact that students or parents—or teachers, in fact—can report concerns that they have to the Office for Students to review them. I will speak to the Office for Students about the transparency and approach of its findings.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: Students feel abandoned by this Government. They have had a terrible experience during the pandemic not only with disrupted studies, but with many facing serious hardship. The new hardship funds are welcome, but they are nowhere near enough, particularly if the Minister expects them to be used if students have trouble paying rents in the private sector too. I hope she is hearing that loudly and clearly from all parts of this House. The hardship funds need to be increased by far more. Applying the Welsh model would suggest a figure of about £700 million for England. Can she explain why students in England are getting a deal that is so much worse than that of their colleagues in Wales?

Michelle Donelan: The funding we have announced is for three months only—that is, £70 million spread over three months. It is my understanding that it is not the same case in Wales. That is in addition to the £256 million that we unlocked, and also on top of that is the money that universities themselves have allocated.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I also welcome the additional funds that were announced yesterday, which will undoubtedly go a long way to helping those in the greatest financial need. But I have heard from many of my constituents who are students at institutions across the country about their continuing to be burdened with the high cost of accommodation, while it is the state that demands they stay at their parental home. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that this is fundamentally a question of fairness? What more can she do to fix that imbalance both for students and for institutions and landlords, as this is not their fault either?

Michelle Donelan: We continue to monitor the situation to see how long this will last and the impact the money we have allocated is having on students. Our priority was to put money into the pockets of those most in need and those who have been impacted the most by this pandemic, but I am more than happy to continue talking to my hon. Friend and any other colleague on this very subject.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP) [V]: I think we should start with a word of congratulations to all the students for putting up with what has been a very challenging situation and encourage them by reminding them that they will get through this, and that they will be tomorrow's generation of leaders in our nation. With students paying rent and rates for digs not being used, being charged full fees for courses that are taught online, and having unpaid loans, mounting debt, and fear for their futures, does the Minister agree that they must not be economically punished as a result of this awful pandemic? We must give them hope, give them help and make sure that this debt is cancelled.

Michelle Donelan: We continue to monitor the situation, but removing the debt would not help students here and now, who we know are facing challenges as a result of this pandemic. That needs to be our priority, so that they can continue to study. They can then qualify in those subjects and go on to the rest of their lives. As I have said to other colleagues, I am more than happy to talk to the hon. Member about this subject.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome this important support package to help our students in these difficult times. As someone who has worked in higher education for many years, both teaching and supporting students, I know first-hand the stresses and strains our students face, and not least the mental health issues many experience. That has been brought into sharp relief in the pandemic. Can my hon. Friend reassure students and their families that institutions are providing suitable mental health and pastoral support to students both onsite and remotely, and that the Government are working to help institutions to do that?

Michelle Donelan: This is something I am particularly passionate about. At every stage, I have reiterated to institutions the importance of mental health and wellbeing provision, and moving that online. Equally, I know that higher education institutions are passionate about providing that level of support. We have worked with the Office for Students to launch Student Space, which is a £3 million project designed specifically to fill in some of the gaps that may have been exposed during the pandemic. I have established a higher education working group to ensure that students are aware of the support available and to boost it.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) [V]: The Government's support package is welcome, but the Minister will be aware that many stakeholders do not think it goes far enough. There is a particular issue about students being required to pay full fees for courses that are nowhere near the quality and content of the course experience they would get if they were actually attending university. The Minister has said that individual students can take their concerns to the Office for Students, but this is a systemic problem. Rather than relying on individual students taking up their concerns, why do the Government not take responsibility themselves for ascertaining whether students are being offered full value in particular courses and universities, and take steps to make sure that students get a rebate?

Michelle Donelan: I have seen many examples of innovative and dynamic tuition throughout this period, but we have been clear that we expect quality, quantity

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and accessibility. I know that some will feel they have not got that, and that is why the process is designed to look at individual student cases on a case-by-case basis.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con) [V]: I welcome the additional money that the Government are providing today, but given that nearly all our universities charge the maximum fee every year, they all should be able to provide at least some support to ease the burden on students at this time. Part of the reason that they are not all doing so is that some of them went into the pandemic with finances that were not quite working, whether because their administration costs were too high or they were overly reliant on international student fees. Does my hon. Friend agree that when we get to the other side of the pandemic, some universities need to look at how they can be more financially resilient, so that they can all provide the support that students deserve?

Michelle Donelan: Our information shows that the sector has been working hard and taking strong action to control costs, protect its cashflow and put in place contingency loan facilities to deal with the pandemic. A recent report in December by the Office for Students showed that the sector in aggregate was in fact healthy.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) [V]: Newham Community Project in my constituency is supporting 1,700 destitute overseas students with weekly food parcels. Those students have paid us a great compliment by choosing Britain to provide them with education and many of them have paid £12,000 a year or more in fees; they should not now be left now without food. Who has the duty of care for those overseas students?

Michelle Donelan: We know that the pandemic has had an impact on student finances, including those of international students. Let me be clear: no students, no matter their origin, should be left in hardship. That is why the £256 million, the £20 million in December and the £50 million that we announced yesterday can be used for international students. I urge any students who find themselves in hardship to go to their university and seek help.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con) [V]: I welcome the extra £50 million to help those most in need and the Minister's call for accommodation providers to give rent rebates. However, when a service is not delivered as expected, the customer is entitled to a refund or credit, so is it not time that universities did the right thing and gave students a fair deal, with rebates on fees where students are not getting the quality of teaching they are paying for, and did so without students having to navigate an appeals process that was not designed for this situation?

Michelle Donelan: I have been clear throughout the pandemic that consumer law has not changed, and Competition and Markets Authority statements confirm that fact and the law's applicability to students. I have been clear that providers should review whether students have received the teaching and assessment they were promised and have regard to the guidance on their consumer protection obligations. The guidance from the CMA for students is available.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: It is completely unfair that teenagers just starting out in adult life are being expected to cover the cost of rental accommodation that they cannot even use in this pandemic. Will the Minister come up with an arrangement with landlords to allow students to leave or renegotiate contracts, and introduce means-tested maintenance grants to give the covid cohort some relief from the hardships they are bearing?

Michelle Donelan: We urge all accommodation providers, especially the large providers, to be as flexible as they possibly can and to have students' best interests at heart, and we have seen the likes of Unite come forward and do that. The hardship funding we have allocated will help those who find themselves in hardship and not able to access any flexibility from their accommodation provider.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con) [V]: Many of the students from Blackpool who are attending university will come from some of the poorest households in the entire country and will now face various additional costs relating to accommodation, access to learning materials and the loss of earnings. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that the additional support, which is to be welcomed, is focused on those who really need it?

Michelle Donelan: The money that we have allocated will go to the Office for Students and then be allocated to universities, which we believe are best placed to make those decisions. Students should go to their university to raise concerns regarding hardship. The money provided is designed to put funds into the pockets of those who most need it now, as a direct result of the pandemic.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: Students are understandably incredibly anxious about how the courses they are taking will be taught and assessed and how the pandemic will have a detrimental impact not just on their academic results but, if —[Inaudible.]— have taught us anything, potentially for decades to come. Will the Government establish a covid student learning remediation fund to allow lost learning to be addressed through the provision of educational opportunities not currently available during the pandemic?

Michelle Donelan: I am actively working with the higher education sector, and at a weekly taskforce meeting we discuss these very topics—how we can catch up and ensure that all students are able to graduate on time, at a world-class level, and go on to the next stage in their lives.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): My hon. Friend will no doubt be aware that Milton Keynes is home to the trailblazing Open University, which has helped over 2.2 million learners achieve their learning goals through remote and virtual education since it was set up in 1969. Now that the rest of the sector is catching up with Milton Keynes, perhaps she might give me some assurances that the expectation is the same as with the Open University—that the number of teaching hours, the quality of the courses and the learning outcomes must be the same for virtual provision.

Michelle Donelan: I, too, am a massive fan of the Open University and the way that it has allowed higher education in this country to be much more flexible and accessible for all. I completely agree with my hon. Friend that all universities need to adhere to our expectation of quality, quantity and accessibility, but it is important to state that university staff have been working tirelessly to deliver that through very challenging times.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Around 78% of students from Wales are worried about the financial impact of covid-19, which is sadly unsurprising given that so many have lost work, are unable to return to universities because of Government restrictions, and yet are still required to pay for private accommodation. Does the Minister anticipate that further support will be forthcoming in the Budget, and will she work closely with the Welsh Government in any discussions with the Treasury to ensure that any additional funding also benefits students in Wales?

Michelle Donelan: I certainly am not responsible for the Budget, so I could not comment on that, but I do work very closely with my Welsh counterpart on issues pertaining not only to students but to the sector at large, in ensuring that we are co-ordinated on our approach.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for responding to the urgent question and answering 39 questions.

Point of Order

1.36 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Last month, the House approved the amended High Speed Rail (West Midlands – Crewe) Bill, which includes Labour’s clause requiring the Government to launch a consultation with the residents of Shropshire, Staffordshire and Cheshire, and to take steps to implement its findings. I welcome the fact that the Government have now begun the consultation, but in a letter sent to residents they warned that at the outset they do not

“intend to make changes to the Phase 2a scheme or to its planned construction programme in light of this consultation.”

That suggests that the Government will not listen to what the residents of the three counties tell them or take steps to implement the findings, as instructed by Parliament.

Mr Deputy Speaker, could you please advise me what opportunities exist to ensure that the Government deliver a proper consultation with the residents of Shropshire, Staffordshire and Cheshire, as they are obliged to do under the Bill and in accordance with the will of Parliament?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for giving notice of it. It is not for the Chair to determine whether the Government’s consultation is adequate, as he has illustrated, although I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard exactly what he had to say and will pass that on to Ministers, and that there will be other opportunities for him to raise this issue in the House.

BILL PRESENTED

GAMING HARDWARE (AUTOMATED PURCHASE AND RESALE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Douglas Chapman, supported by Martyn Day, Ronnie Cowan and Margaret Ferrier, presented a Bill to prohibit the automated purchase and resale of games consoles and computer components; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 253).

Air Quality

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

1.38 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for improving air quality.

A key part of my plan to improve life for my constituents in Chipping Barnet is cleaning up the air we breathe. Poor air quality is the greatest environmental threat to public health. Every year, thousands of people have their health damaged or their lives shortened by air pollution. This problem is especially serious in London, with many of the country's worst pollution hotspots here in our capital city.

Our air is now cleaner than at any point since the industrial revolution, and the Government are meeting all but one of their current air quality targets, but there is so much more work to be done. Progress has slowed in recent years and we need a concerted national effort to tackle this problem from Government, from councils, from mayors, from business, from individuals.

The Government's 2017 clean air strategy was praised by the World Health Organisation as

"an example for the rest of the world to follow",

but we need to go further and faster. Ella Kissi-Debrah's case should be a wake-up call for all of us. Ella was just nine years old when she suffered a fatal asthma attack in 2013. She lived just yards from the busy and congested South Circular Road, and the coroner in her case concluded that air pollution made a material contribution to her tragic death. Ella is the very first person in the United Kingdom for whom air pollution has been officially recognised as a cause of death.

In my former role as Environment Secretary I introduced the Environment Bill to this House. This landmark new law will set a framework for a rigorous system of target-setting, monitoring and accountability, and one of the most important and ambitious elements of the Bill is the requirement to set a legally binding target to reduce PM_{2.5} fine particulate matter. This type of pollution does the greatest damage to human health, and I hope and expect the new target to be among the most demanding in the world. There is clear support across this House for us to be the first major developed economy to commit to getting PM_{2.5} particulate limits down to the 10 micrograms per cubic metre maximum recommended by the World Health Organisation. The only question is what date we set, and I appeal today to Ministers to accelerate the vital detailed research and consultation needed to make that decision and set that date as soon as possible.

A crucial part of the action to deliver on the target when it is set is protection and enhancement of nature, and I applaud my local council, Barnet, for planting around 3,000 trees in the last two years, including 700 targeted at air quality and urban heat island purposes.

I appeal to the Government to ensure that the planning Bill expected in the autumn maintains and strengthens protection for trees and open spaces, which provide crucial green lungs for our towns and cities. The environmental land management schemes, which will replace the EU's common agricultural policy, can also

play an important role in safeguarding nature and thus addressing pollution, and I urge the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that these environmental schemes are used to support farming practices that emit less ammonia pollution.

Domestic burning also makes a significant contribution to particulate pollution, and more people need to be aware of the impact of their choices in how they heat their homes. The most polluting fuels used in domestic burning are due to be banned by early 2023, and the Environment Bill will make it easier for councils to introduce smoke control zones and provide more powers to enforce them. They need to use these powers.

Our efforts to combat climate change can also be harnessed to drive quality improvements. One of the reasons for recent progress on air quality is the UK's success in shifting away from coal to cleaner ways to generate electricity, and of course the transition to ultra low emission driving is crucial both for our climate and our air quality goals. Encouraging cycling, walking and active travel of course has real benefits in terms of health, air quality and congestion, and I applaud projects that, for example, encourage parents and children to walk to school, but care does have to be taken with these schemes, such as cycle lanes and low traffic neighbourhoods, because if they are introduced in a hurry in the wrong place without appropriate consultation, they can inadvertently worsen air quality because of the consequent congestion they cause.

But the really big change we need in our transport system is to ensure that we switch to cleaner cars, vans, lorries, taxis, buses and motorbikes. Nothing else is going to deliver the air quality improvements we urgently need.

First, the Volkswagen scandal and then the collapse of the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency prosecution of the company Klarius demonstrated that we need better enforcement of standards on tailpipe emissions and tougher sanctions when rules are broken. The Environment Bill will help, because it will mean that Ministers can require manufacturers to recall vehicles if they do not comply with environmental standards and, thus, illegally polluting vehicles will be taken off the road more quickly.

The Government are taking forward a £3.8 billion plan to reduce harmful emissions from transport, including £1.5 billion to support the uptake of ultra-low emission vehicles and nearly half a billion to help local authorities implement air quality improvement measures.

Last year, the Prime Minister announced £5 billion for bus services in England, including 4,000 new ultra-low emission buses. His 10-point climate plan commits to ending the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2030. That is one of the most aggressive targets set by any country, anywhere in the world. It will require further massive investment in research and development, to make electric cars and vans a more practical, affordable option, as well as in charging infrastructure.

I welcome all the substantial funding currently going into climate and air quality-related technology projects, which are essential, including the £250 million Faraday challenge on batteries. In this country, we already manufacture a considerable proportion of the plug-in electric cars sold around Europe. We should use the 2030 target as an opportunity to create new green jobs. Nissan's announcement on moving battery production to the UK is really encouraging news.

Lastly, I ask Ministers to give priority to tackling air quality in London, because this is where the problem is most serious. London received funding for air quality as part of the £5.7 billion Transport for London funding settlement in 2015, and has received further support for individual projects of about £150 million. That includes money to retrofit buses to reduce emissions, and all London buses were due to be Euro 6 compliant by the end of last year. However, I am concerned that the Mayor of London has not made more progress on air quality or on delivering zero-emission buses, despite the significant resources he has been given by the Government to do that. His plan for a zero-emission bus fleet will take another 17 years to complete. Shaun Bailey believes progress needs to be much faster and has set out how he would do that as a Conservative Mayor for London. I am also worried that the Mayor's mismanagement of TfL's budget, including through the lengthy delays to Crossrail, will make it harder to deliver the investment we need to buy cleaner, greener buses.

I have one last ask of the Government. If they are serious about air quality, they should cancel plans to build a third runway at Heathrow. Nitrogen oxides problems around the airport are already very serious, and I cannot see any way in which the promoters of the scheme can possibly find a means to comply with those limits, never mind new ones adopted under the Environment Bill, while still accommodating the huge increase in surface transport that would be generated by thousands more flights. The viability case has been severely damaged by the collapse in passenger numbers. It is time to put this misguided runway project out of its misery. It is time to clean up the air we breathe, and I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Theresa Villiers, Bob Blackman, Andrew Rosindell, Bob Seely, Felicity Buchan, Chris Loder, Steve Brine, Neil Parish, George Freeman, Dr Rupa Huq, Geraint Davies and Jim Shannon present the Bill.

Theresa Villiers accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 254).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting—

(1) notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents) and Standing Order No. 17 (Delegated Legislation (negative procedure)), the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on—

(a) the Motions in the name of Nigel Adams relating to Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) (SI, 2019, Nos. 1142 and 1145, and SI, 2020, Nos. 590, 597, 608, 610, 951, 1468 and 1474) not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on this Motion,

(b) the Motions in the name of Jesse Norman relating to Exiting the European Union (Value Added Tax) (SI, 2020, Nos. 1312 and 1544) not later than one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the first such Motion,

(c) the Motion in the name of Ian Blackford relating to the Travellers' Allowances and Miscellaneous Provisions (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (SI, 2020, No. 1412) not later than one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion;

(d) those Motions may be proceeded with, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and

(2) the Motion in the name of Tom Hunt relating to grooming gangs may be proceeded with, though opposed, after the moment of interruption, and may continue for one hour after its commencement or until 7.00 pm, whichever is the later, and shall then lapse if not previously concluded.—(*David Rutley.*)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I suspend the sitting for three minutes.

1.50 pm

Sitting suspended.

Exiting the European Union (Sanctions)

1.53 pm

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): I beg to move,

That the Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 608), dated 18 June 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 June, be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With this we will take the following motions:

That the Burundi (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 1142), dated 18 July 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 19 July 2019, in the last Parliament, be approved.

That the Cyber (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 597), dated 15 June 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 17 June, be approved.

That the Guinea (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 1145), dated 18 July 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 19 July 2019, in the last Parliament, be approved.

That the Misappropriation (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1468), dated 7 December 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 9 December, be approved.

That the Nicaragua (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 610), dated 18 June 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 June, be approved.

That the Sanctions (EU Exit) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 590), dated 11 June 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 15 June, be approved.

That the Sanctions (EU Exit) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (No. 4) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 951), dated 3 September 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 8 September, be approved.

That the Unauthorised Drilling Activities in the Eastern Mediterranean (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1474), dated 7 December 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 11 December, be approved.

James Cleverly: The nine instruments before us were laid between July 2019 and December 2020 under powers provided by the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, also known as the sanctions Act. As the House will be aware, on 31 December 2020, the UK took control of its sanctions policy and we now have a full suite of sanctions regimes at our disposal under the sanctions Act. This provides the legal framework within which the UK may impose, update and lift sanctions, whether autonomously or in line with our UN obligations now that we have left the European Union.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the very serious campaign to take action against China because of the treatment of the Uyghurs, and we are asked to produce motions on genocide, but it seems to me that now we have left the European Union, that action is now in our hands, so will he confirm that we can now take robust action against the Chinese Government in the form of sanctions, perhaps against the fashion industry or on importing cotton from that part of China? We now have the freedom to act if we want to, and I hope that the Government will.

James Cleverly: I thank my right hon. Friend for the point that he has made, and I will go into a bit more detail about the framework within which we can operate. He will understand that the Government choose not to discuss any future sanctions we may impose, to prevent

either the movement of moneys or other things that we might approach, but my colleagues in Government and I absolutely hear the point that he has made.

Our sanctions regime is the foundation for an independent sanctions policy in support of our foreign policy and national security interests. With this framework in place, the UK can use sanctions to act as a force for good in the world. Working with partners both old and new, we can collaborate to project our values and tackle unacceptable behaviour wherever we find it. Our global human rights regime is just one example of this. Of course, where collaboration is not possible or where swift leadership is required, we now have the freedom to act, as we did with Belarus and, most recently, in relation to Zimbabwe. On Monday, we designated four security sector chiefs who were responsible for the worst humanitarian rights violations committed against the people of Zimbabwe since President Mnangagwa took power, including the deaths of 23 protesters. Our sanctions send a clear message that those responsible for such acts will be held to account.

In order to establish individual sanctions regimes within the framework of the sanctions Act, we are required to lay statutory instruments. Among other things, these instruments set out the purpose of the regime, the criteria for designation, the measures imposed, exceptions and licensing arrangements, and the offences and penalties for contravention of these measures.

Of the nine instruments we are considering today, seven transition existing EU regimes into UK law. The UK is at the forefront of developing multilateral contributions on sanctions and has played a large part in shaping the EU's approach. As a result, the measures contained in the UK sanctions, such as asset freezes and travel bans, are intended to have substantially the same policy effect as those in the regimes that they replace.

Certain types of sanctions measures, such as asset freezes and travel bans, apply to those who we designate. The instruments themselves do not specify which individuals or entities will be designated. Designations are instead made through an administrative process and published on the UK's sanction list. Officials assessed all those designated under the EU regimes against the test established in the sanctions Act and UK policy objectives before the end of the transition period. The vast majority of EU designations met those criteria.

The two remaining instruments amend other statutory instruments that established sanctions regimes. These amendments are designed to ensure that our entire suite of sanctions legislation is as consistent and clear in its provisions as possible. Many regimes contain the same sanctions measures, and consistency in language promotes consistency in interpretation, application and enforcement. British businesses often export goods or provide services to more than one country that is subject to sanctions, and any inconsistency in the wording of legislation can cause confusion and increase their compliance costs. The amendments also ensure that UK persons in the Crown dependencies and overseas territories are not unduly impacted by extraterritorial application of UK law. They create an exemption for the extraterritorial prohibitions so that a licence from the authorities in that jurisdiction is sufficient to authorise a UK person's conduct there. Those persons do not need also to obtain a licence from the UK authorities in order to avoid committing an offence under UK law.

I will elaborate a little further on the purposes of the seven regimes that these instruments establish. The Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 are aimed at promoting peace, security and stability in Bosnia and respect for its sovereignty and territorial integrity. They are also intended to encourage compliance with, and the implementation of, the general framework agreement for peace, which established Bosnia and Herzegovina as a single sovereign state. The regulations permit the imposition of financial and immigration sanctions. Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the countries in the western Balkans most at risk of instability. Its domestic political situation is affected by institutional dysfunctionality, diverse ethno-nationalistic rhetoric, attempts to undermine the functions of the state and its institutions and challenges to the general framework agreement for peace. These sanctions are a public demonstration of our enduring commitment to promoting stability and security in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Burundi (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 aim to encourage the Government of Burundi to respect democratic principles and institutions, the rule of law and good governance in Burundi, to participate in negotiations with political opponents in good faith to bring about peaceful solutions to the political situation in Burundi, to refrain from policies and activities that repress civil society in Burundi, to comply with international humanitarian rights and to respect human rights. They permit the imposition of financial and immigration sanctions. Following elections in May 2020, there was a peaceful transfer of power to a new President in June 2020. Nevertheless, we continue to have concerns about the human rights situation, and we believe that these sanctions continue to have a role in promoting respect for human rights in Burundi.

The Cyber (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 are aimed at preventing certain types of cyber-activity that undermine the integrity, prosperity or security of the UK or any other country. They are also intended to prevent certain types of cyber-activity that cause economic loss or prejudice commercial interests, undermine the independence or effective functioning of an international organisation or otherwise affect a significant number of people in an indiscriminate manner. The regulations permit the imposition of financial and immigration sanctions. The cyber threat is growing, with attacks increasing in their intensity, complexity and severity. Malign actors in cyber-space are able to carry out attacks on other countries' critical national infrastructure, democratic institutions, businesses and media. These sanctions demonstrate that there are consequences for such attacks and restrict access to the resources for those who would seek to carry them out.

The Guinea (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 aim to encourage the Government of Guinea to properly investigate the violent repression that took place on 28 September 2009 and its aftermath and to hold those responsible to account. These sanctions make clear that these events, in which more than 150 people were killed, have not been forgotten, and that their perpetrators should face justice, as well as providing a deterrent for the future. The regulations permit the imposition of targeted financial and immigration sanctions.

The Misappropriation (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 are aimed at deterring and providing accountability for the misappropriation of state funds from a country

outside the UK. They permit the imposition of financial and immigration sanctions. Rather than establish geographic regimes, as existed under the EU legislation, this statutory instrument creates a single thematic regime under which designations can be made in respect of misappropriation of state funds taking place anywhere outside the UK, allowing for greater agility and flexibility. Corruption, and in particular misappropriation of state funds, has a significant negative effect on national and international prosperity, security and governance. The cost of corruption worldwide is estimated to be more than 2% of global GDP. These sanctions are part of our wider strategy to combat this issue.

The Nicaragua (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 are aimed at encouraging the Government in Nicaragua to respect democratic principles and institutions, the separation of powers and the rule of law; to refrain from the repression of civil society, and to respect human rights. The regulations permit the imposition of financial and immigration sanctions. These sanctions function as a clear signal of our intention to maintain the pressure on the repressive Ortega regime and as a tool through which we can exert this pressure.

The Unauthorised Drilling Activities in the Eastern Mediterranean (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 aim to discourage any unauthorised hydrocarbon exploration or production activities in the territorial sea or exclusive economic zone of the Republic of Cyprus or on its continental shelf. They permit the imposition of financial and immigration sanctions. We recognise, and have consistently stated our support for, the sovereign right of the Republic of Cyprus to exploit the oil and gas in its internationally agreed exclusive economic zone. Cyprus's oil and gas should be used for the benefit of Cypriots. These sanctions demonstrate our opposition to unauthorised drilling and the violation of other states' sovereignty.

Sanctions are a key part of the UK's foreign policy toolbox, and feature in many of our political and diplomatic strategies. We use them to change unacceptable behaviour by coercing or constraining those involved, or by sending a political signal that their actions will not be tolerated. They also contribute to our efforts to uphold and defend the rules-based international order. The UK has long been a global leader on sanctions, and that will not change now that we have left the European Union. Our independent sanctions policy allows us to use sanctions to achieve maximum impact, working in a way that is agile, expertise-driven and in support of our values, and which enables collaboration with both new and established partners.

International co-operation is at the heart of our policy. Sanctions are most effective when implemented and enforced collectively, and we will continue to co-ordinate closely with our European and other international partners on sanctions. These regulations are a crucial part of the legal edifice that underpins our sanctions policy, of which the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 is a keystone. With them in place, we can promote and protect security, stability and prosperity at home and overseas, call for accountability and justice, and deter human rights violations and abuses. In short, we can project the UK as a force for good in the world. I welcome the opportunity to hear the views of Members about the regulations and to answer their questions. I commend these regulations to the House.

2.7 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his introduction to these sets of regulations. Let me be clear that the Opposition welcome these instruments to roll over the European Union sanctions regimes into UK legislation, and to clarify and ensure the applicability of a series of other measures. As the Minister has explained, these regulations apply to a wide range of country contexts, but are largely focused on targeted measures and on some specific themes, such as the misappropriation of state funds and the use of cyber-attacks.

The Labour Opposition want to see a global Britain as—as the Minister has described—a force for good in the world, with human rights, the rule of law and democracy at the heart of all our foreign policies. We have unique responsibilities as a member of the UN Security Council, the Human Rights Council and the Commonwealth, as well as in the international legal architecture. However, it is disappointing, as I have noted previously, to have seen the diminishing of the UK role in both human rights bodies and the loss of our seat, for example, on the International Court of Justice in recent years.

That said, as the shadow Foreign Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), has made clear, we have supported and continue to support a strengthening of the UK sanctions regime to ensure that those who abuse human rights, attack civilians, threaten democracy, the rule of law and the rights and freedoms of civil society, or use corruption, torture and murder to further their own ends have no safe haven for themselves or their dirty money in the UK or our overseas territories.

Sir Edward Leigh: Does that include sanctions against China?

Stephen Doughty: I will come to that point in due course. The right hon. Gentleman has made some important points, and he knows that those concerns are shared across the House, particularly with regard to the Uyghur minority and the shocking revelations that are coming out.

As a member of the European Union, the UK played a leading role in designating individuals and entities for targeted sanctions. We hope that, in seeking to maintain a close friendship with the European Union and our partners now that we have left, the Government will work closely with them as well as other like-minded countries and global institutions. We also hope that the Government will do more with the powers that we now have at our disposal through the Magnitsky sanctions regime, expanding their scope and usage, as well as increasing the transparency to the House, including about the processes by which decisions are made on designations for sanctions. I hope that the rolling over of these sanctions is a sign of the Government's intention to maintain a collaborative and friendly approach with our friends in the EU.

Before turning to the individual countries and thematic sanctions that the Minister has outlined, I want to ask him a question. The transition period ended on 31 December last year. What has been in place in the interim weeks? Have these sanctions continued to apply? It is obviously very important that there have not been loopholes in the last few weeks, before these measures were brought before us.

First, on Burundi, we are fully supportive of rolling over the sanctions. The EU extended the sanction regime last year to last until 31 December this year. The last five years have unfortunately seen significant problems in respect of democracy and human rights. We hope that the new Government will seek to reverse many of the dangerous steps that the previous President and Government took. We saw the police, the National Intelligence Service and the ruling party's youth wing carrying out extensive human rights violations, with allegations of extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and torture. In October 2019, four members of the Imbonerakure were convicted for killing a member of the opposition party, the National Congress for Freedom.

We believe that the Burundi Government must seek to release human rights defenders and journalists arrested under a crackdown on opposition. That includes Germain Rukuki, a former employee of Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture, human rights defender Nestor Nibitanga and four journalists from the Iwacu press group who were arrested in October 2019, whose names I can provide to the Minister. We very much hope that Burundi will follow a process of re-engagement with international bodies on human rights, including allowing the UN human rights office to be reopened in the country and engaging with commissions from the UN Human Rights Council, which the UK has a key seat on.

On Guinea, we agree with the Government on rolling over these sanctions, which relate back to the significant violence we saw in 2009, in which 150 people were brutally killed in a stadium in the capital, Conakry, and hundreds more were wounded, with women being victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence. It was a deeply distressing time for the people of Guinea, and there was widespread condemnation from the international community. There was some progress in 2014, and some sanctions were released. Could the Minister say a little bit about what progress there has been since then and whether these sanctions have had the impact that we want to see?

On Bosnia, I visited Srebrenica with the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart)—I believe you were on that trip, Mr Deputy Speaker—and we saw for ourselves the legacy of that terrible conflict in our own continent. I agree with the Government: it is vital that we continue to make clear our intent to stand against any of those who would undermine the security and peace that was so hard won by the general framework agreement for peace—the Dayton agreement—in 1995. That allowed for much progress, but significant tensions and concerns remain. Could the Minister clarify whether individuals have been or would be designated under this framework, or are we saying that the framework is in place to underpin the Dayton agreement and that we would not hesitate to use it with others to ensure peace and stability in that country, which is crucial for not only the people of Bosnia but the wider Balkan region?

On Nicaragua, the explanatory notes set out clearly some of the very serious allegations that have been made about the descent into repression and violence there, so it is right that we roll over these sanctions. The social security reforms announced in April 2018 triggered ongoing protests that have continued for nearly three years. The allegations are that by the end of 2019, at least 328 people had been killed, primarily by state

security forces and pro-Government armed groups, and more than 2,000 others injured. There have been truly shocking allegations regarding mass graves, clandestine facilities, detention of political prisoners and attacks on members of the Catholic Church. The Government have also apparently banned the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights from the country and rejected the report of Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. That is deeply concerning, and we welcome these measures.

On cyber sanctions, clearly there is an increasing factor of threats to global security, our own national security, and our commercial security. Threats and attacks on our financial institutions, democracy and security have become very clear in recent years, and they will likely only increase. The EU's first ever sanctions last year made this a vital defensive tool in our arsenal against cyber-attacks.

I understand that the targeted individuals include those from China working on Operation Cloud Hopper. They are alleged to have stolen intellectual property and sensitive commercial data over many years, targeting companies across six continents and sectors including banking, finance, government, aviation, space, satellite technology, manufacturing, medical, oil and gas, mining, communications, computer processing and defence. This is a huge range of measures that these hostile individuals are attempting to attack. I also understand that they target intelligence officers from the Russian general main intelligence directorate and, in April 2018, attempted to gain access to information systems of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. It is absolutely crucial that we work with our EU allies, the United States, our NATO allies and, of course, the Five Eyes community to take the most robust actions against those individuals involved with the Chinese and Russian regimes to ensure that they do not threaten our security or that of the globe.

In the miscellaneous amendments regulations, a whole series of measures are set out to clarify sanctions relating to Iran, Venezuela, Belarus, Myanmar, Zimbabwe, Syria, Russia, Guinea-Bissau, the chemical weapons convention and many other aspects. Will the Minister be clear about whether they simply ensure the applicability and effectiveness of these measures, or expand or alter them in any way? One challenge in scrutinising these measures—I hope the Minister refers to this matter—is that sanctions are often complex, and rightly so, and we need to ensure that we understand the full intent of what the Government are trying to achieve with them.

The second set of miscellaneous regulations deal with the issues relating to the overseas territories and Crown dependencies. I understand the Minister's point that we do not want to see double prohibition and therefore a double licensing burden on individuals through those regulations. However, it is absolutely crucial that we ensure that there are no loopholes and no lack of oversight, so that individuals do not seek to exploit any gaps or administrative gaps. Will the Minister say a little bit more about what support is being provided to the overseas territories to ensure that they can apply the sanctions regimes, and that there is a commonality across the whole British family of the overseas territories to ensure that we have one approach? Unfortunately, we know that in the past regimes have been used, whether

financially or otherwise, to escape scrutiny and transparency, not least in the light of the current investigations into governance in the British Virgin Islands. Indeed, I have supported the Government on their commission of inquiry there. It is absolutely crucial that we have assurances on that front.

On misappropriation, this applies mainly to individuals and entities related to Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 and Ukraine in 2014. Can the Minister further comment on how effective those have been? Will he confirm that the two persons and four entities added to the EU sanctions list in October 2020, related to the construction of bridge and railway tracks linking Russia to the illegally annexed Crimean peninsula via the Kerch Strait, will be included? Will the Government seek to work with our allies to target individuals who further seek to isolate Crimea from Ukraine? That is obviously critical.

On the unauthorised drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean, again, we wholeheartedly support the rolling over of sanctions and welcome its extension by both the European Union and the UK Government. Unauthorised drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean are in direct contravention of the sovereign rights of Cyprus, within its territorial sea, exclusive economic zone and continental shelf, and they threaten the process of reaching a delimitation agreement and a bizonal, bicommunal political settlement for the whole of Cyprus. We hope that the UK Government will continue to work with the EU to maintain our full solidarity with the Government of Cyprus and work on restrictive measures to prevent further violations of the rules-based order that governs our seas and oceans. That is an absolutely crucial set of rules and guidance to which we are one of the key parties, and it is crucial that we ensure that they are applied in relation to Cyprus.

Finally, let me make some broader points in relation to these measures today. The sanctions before us show the benefit of a collaborative international approach to sanctions, and one that has support from all parts of this House. The question remains why, with such long-standing and overwhelming evidence growing of systemic human rights abuses on an industrial scale against the Muslim Uyghur people and other minorities in China, with the attacks on the democracy and freedom of the people of Hong Kong and with the United States Government having already barred members of the Communist party of China from the US, we have not seen further designations of Magnitsky-style sanctions against officials of the Communist party of China.

We have repeatedly called on the Government to impose sanctions against senior officials and entities directly responsible for appalling human rights abuses in Xinjiang. We have pressed for that for months but no action has been taken, so I hope the Minister can assure us that such sanctions are under consideration and explain what discussions we have had about them with our allies.

Similarly, the Labour Opposition have consistently urged the Government to go further in their sanctions on the Myanmar military, including by targeting its business interests. I know that some of these regulations relate to previous sanctions on Myanmar. The Government failed to follow the recommendation made last year by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), the shadow Minister for Asia and the Pacific, on the basis that such sanctions could have a negative

[Stephen Doughty]

impact on foreign investment in the Myanmar economy. Not least given the events of the last few days, we believe that the Minister should move immediately to target military officials who are responsible for a brazen attack on the democratic rights of the Myanmar people, and support Magnitsky sanctions on individuals involved.

As shadow Minister for Africa, I welcome the targeted designations against senior individuals in the Zimbabwe Government who were involved in state-backed attacks on protesters in 2019 and violence in 2018. Will the Minister confirm that those sanctions are effective immediately? We are seeing significant violence and political repercussions elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, as I said in a Westminster Hall debate about the shocking events surrounding the #EndSARS movement and the massacres at the Lekki tollgate plaza and elsewhere. I hope that Ministers are giving serious consideration to the recommendation made in that debate of targeted measures against any individuals who were involved in such shocking attacks or repression of the Nigerian people, and I hope that Ministers are listening to the wealth of evidence out there from independent human rights organisations.

In Uganda in recent days, the presidential election has been marred by the continual arrests of Opposition Members and journalists, as well as by violence and human rights abuses. I have had some quite shocking evidence put to me. The Opposition leader was arrested multiple times and put under house arrest, with the military invading his home after the election, and there has been intimidation and attacks on journalists. It is alleged that the Uganda chief of police, Martin Okoth Ochola, stated:

“Yes, we shall beat you for your own sake to help you understand that you do not go there...I have no apology”.

What are the Government going to do to stand up for the rights and freedoms of the people of Uganda? What consideration has been given to targeted sanctions against any individual involved in the violations and repressions in Guinea and elsewhere, which are rightly being targeted? It is important that we have consistency.

We continue to see the horrific consequences of conflict in the Tigray region in Ethiopia. Hundreds have been killed, and thousands have fled to neighbouring Sudan. There is regional instability involving Eritrea and others, and a range of very serious allegations are being made about atrocities that have been committed. What assessment have the Government made of those atrocities and whether there are grounds for individual sanctions against any individual involved—from whatever side or whatever background in that conflict—who is responsible for violations of human rights or humanitarian law?

Finally, I hope that we will have an honest conversation about how a UK sanctions regime will work. The EU and the US work together co-operatively to secure strong applicability of measures, and the UK must be part of that process. Ultimately, as the Minister indicated, the strength of sanctions is dependent on a unified, agreed and consistently applied framework across multiple jurisdictions. If we veer from common positions—whether in Europe, across NATO or with our Atlantic allies—that will be of huge detriment. I hope the Government will give a firm commitment to acting in all these areas, and

to ensuring consistency in the measures that the United Kingdom applies in our overseas territories and in working with our allies.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Alyn Smith. I understand that there may be some communication gremlins at work, Alyn, but if the link goes down we will go to audio.

2.23 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; I hope that the technology is working for us today.

If brevity is the soul of wit, I can be positively hilarious this afternoon. The SNP has no objection to these measures being rolled over. We welcome the fact that they are being incorporated and carried on, for the reasons so ably outlined by the Labour spokesperson, but also because of the more general principle that we believe in multilateral action on this sort of stuff, and we think that we will be far stronger working with our European allies. We regret leaving the European Union altogether, and we would like to see continued dynamic alignment with the EU on this sort of stuff. I think the scope for lateral manoeuvre that the UK has gained from Brexit is somewhat overstated, and we are far stronger working with our European allies—and, indeed, the US under the new Administration—on these sorts of topics. We have no objection to these measures and we are pleased to support them this afternoon.

2.24 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: I start by welcoming the sanctions. I restate the deeply held position of the Lib Dems, which is, of course, that we should always aim to work in concert with the European Union on all these matters. I am always heartened to see the broad consensus in the House on this issue. It prompts the question why, on important matters, we do not sometimes move faster—because we can.

On Burundi, we know from UN reports that the Burundian army launched attacks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo between 2019 and 2020, in violation of the sanctions regime. It is a terrible situation, especially with regard to the media there, including the BBC. Although recent moves by the new President to reopen the media show that sanctions are working, we have to take a precautionary approach and must not let up too soon.

In Guinea, the Government of Guinea have yet to properly investigate the violent repression of 2008-09 and the aftermath of that violence against their own people. So while I welcome the sanctions in their aim of holding those responsible to account, my question to the Government is, are they measuring the impact of the sanctions over time, and are we any closer now to achieving our objectives than when those sanctions were originally introduced under EU legislation?

The conflict following the break-up of Yugoslavia was something on which the late, great Lord Ashdown showed much leadership. The UK must absolutely promote the sovereignty of, and peace and stability in, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

I am sure that the House is unanimous in its agreement that more must be done in Nicaragua to respect democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

While I of course welcome the roll-over of all these sanctions, I would echo the calls across the House for us to do more, particularly on Russia, where we must have a more robust response to the imprisonment of Navalny; and on the Uyghurs in China, where there is huge support for such a response in the House, as has been well rehearsed in the past few weeks. I hope the Minister can see that no party in the House will let up. We do want more done, particularly with regard to Magnitsky sanctions, on these matters.

2.27 pm

James Cleverly: I am genuinely grateful for the contributions that have been made from a number of corners of the House. I think it sends a very important international signal that although there are many subjects on which we have deeply felt and legitimate disagreements, right across the political spectrum here in the United Kingdom there is a real unanimity of voice when it comes to the importance of sanctions and the UK's place in the world.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for his thoughtful contributions and questions, which I will attempt to cover in this closing address. I also thank the hon. Members for Stirling (Alyn Smith) and for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and, although he is no longer in his place, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for their contributions.

As I said at the start of the debate, this year represents a crucial moment for the UK's foreign policy. We now have in place a framework that can be used to act as a force for good in the world. The UK supported these sanctions when we were a member of the EU and we hope that, by carrying them over into UK domestic law, we have made a clear statement—which I believe has been reflected in the contributions of others in the House—that we choose to adopt them, not because we were coerced into them by our membership of the European Union, but because we absolutely believe that they are the right things to do.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will permit Mr Shannon to join in, because I know he has been following the debate from outside the Chamber.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister; I have been watching the debate on TV.

My question is specifically about Northern Ireland. Does the Minister believe that the sanctions proposed in the statutory instruments will address Gaddafi and Libyan-sponsored terrorism? American victims of events on British soil are entitled to reparations, while our citizens languish for years without it. That is a very important issue for us in Northern Ireland, and the rest of the United Kingdom as well. How will the provisions address the extradition of terrorists such as al-Senussi, Gaddafi's general, who has still not been made to face justice in Britain after supplying the IRA with Semtex that was used in 250 bombings? Will the Minister confirm that these regulations will prevent that failure from being repeated?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. He pays assiduous attention to the debates in which he contributes, and I am glad that he has been able to take part despite the gremlins in the technology.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the fact that the imposition of sanctions does not prevent the UK Government from being a force for good domestically as well as internationally. I am not able to go into detail on the specific matter that he has raised, although it is important. We always ensure through our sanctions regime that we are able to stand on the international stage feeling proud of the work we have done, which is driven by a moral point. I will correspond with the hon. Gentleman to provide more details about his specific question.

A number of hon. Members rightly raised current and future co-ordination with the European Union. As I stated initially, it is important that we understand that the United Kingdom has a discrete and autonomous sanctions regime; the EU may choose to pursue sanctions different from ours. Nevertheless, we know that sanctions are more effective when they are delivered in co-ordination, and we will continue to co-operate closely with our allies, partners and near neighbours in the European Union, in co-ordination, where possible, with other countries around the world, so that we can be more effective in the work we do through our sanctions regimes.

Jim Shannon: As the human rights spokesperson for my party, I also wish to ask a question about regulation 8 of the SI on Bosnia. Is the provision that the Secretary of State

“must take steps to publicise the designation, variation or revocation” compatible with our duty to respect the human rights of individuals and family members of said alleged offenders? How does the Minister believe the balance between sanction and interference is achieved?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his important but technical point. I do not want to go into too much detail at the Dispatch Box; again, if he will forgive me, I will make sure that my officials take note of his point and that we write to him about it.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth asked whether there was a pause between the end of the transition period and now. I assure him that the regulations were laid in the course of 2019 and 2020, and came into force on 31 December, so there was no interruption in the sanctions regime.

Colleagues around the House have suggested examples of where our sanctions regime could be applied in the future. Rather than address each individually, I make the point that we have taken notice of those examples, in many of which very important, severe and concerning issues are at stake. It is the long-standing policy of the UK Government not to discuss future sanctions and future designations to prevent, for example, the flight of individuals or the hiding of funds that may be the target of our sanction regimes, but I can assure all Members that the examples they have raised will be taken into consideration.

Stephen Doughty: I understand what the Minister is saying. On a practical point, Members are regularly approached with very serious evidence, sometimes involving individuals who may have been committing atrocities.

[Stephen Doughty]

How can independent human rights organisations and others best input into the decision-making process, even if he does not want to pre-announce those designations?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. I would not wish to imply that any method is precluded. The most traditional method is that individuals and NGOs contact the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I often read correspondence from right hon. and hon. Members across the House bringing their concerns to my attention. That is, of course, a well-established way of doing it. Once we are once again able to come together physically in this place, the tap on the shoulder in the Division Lobby, the Tea Room and the corridors is also a traditional way for right hon. and hon. Members to bring matters to our attention in a discreet way. I completely recognise that there are times when raising an issue on the Floor of the House can put individuals in greater danger. We are passionate about making the sanctions regime a success and a meaningful tool as a force in the world, and we are more than happy for Members across the House to bring their concerns to our attention.

Cyber-sanctions will be one of our key tools as an autonomous regime. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth highlighted that it will be an increasingly important part of the work we do. He also asked about the designations in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We have mirrored the EU structure and we have a framework in place. Although there are no designations in place at the moment, it is there as a very visible method to reinforce the importance we attach to peace, stability and prosperity, to be used at some point in the future if needs be.

I think almost every Member who spoke today raised the situation of the Uyghur Muslims and China. As the Foreign Secretary said, we have serious concerns about the human rights situation in Xinjiang, including the extrajudicial detention of over 1 million Uyghur Muslims and other minorities in political re-education camps, the systematic restrictions on Uyghur culture and the practice of Islam, and the extensive invasive surveillance targeting minorities. On 12 January, the Foreign Secretary announced a series of robust measures to help ensure that no British organisations—Government or private sector—deliberately or inadvertently profit from or contribute to human rights violations against the Uyghurs and other Muslims.

We have taken a leading international role in holding China to account for its human rights violations in Xinjiang. We led the first international joint statements on this issue at the UN General Assembly Third Committee in October 2019 and in June 2020 at the UN Human Rights Council. On 6 October 2020, alongside Germany, we brought together a total of 39 countries to express our grave concerns about the situation in Xinjiang in a joint statement at the UN General Assembly Third Committee. In addition, the Foreign Secretary raised Xinjiang directly with his Chinese counterpart, Foreign Minister and State Councillor Wang Yi, on a number of occasions.

The situation in Myanmar has also been raised. We consider the recent election to be broadly representative, as do international observers, and we consider the National League for Democracy Government led by Aung Sang Suu Kyi to be the legitimate Government in Myanmar.

We wholeheartedly condemn the coup d'état, the military seizure of power and the detention of the State Counsellor and other political and civil society leaders. The attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the recent elections are completely unacceptable.

Jim Shannon: Indications in the press yesterday and in the media today suggest that China may have played a bigger role in the coup. Has the Minister had any opportunity to speak to the representatives of China to express deep concern about any involvement in the coup, taking away the democratic process and imposing an autocratic process?

James Cleverly: It would not be appropriate for me to speculate on involvement in what has happened in Myanmar, but the hon. Member will have seen that the Foreign Secretary has made a statement on this, in conjunction with others in the international community.

Stephen Doughty: The Minister is being very generous in taking interventions. A moment ago, in relation to China, he mentioned the importance of UK-based companies and their role, and he is now speaking about Myanmar. Will the Government look again at the situation where the UK's Commonwealth Development Corporation has been investing in telecommunications companies in Myanmar that have been complying with Government-ordered repression and blockages of internet sites and others, which not only have potentially covered up atrocities against the Rohingya people, but could be being used now? Will he look again at that investment and whether it is appropriate in the current circumstances?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and I will ensure that I speak to my ministerial colleague in the other place, Lord Ahmad, about that matter.

The instruments we have been considering today demonstrate the range and scope of the situations in which we use sanctions. I am grateful to hon. Members across the House who have raised other circumstances where we might choose to do so. The instruments also demonstrate the outcomes that they are intended to achieve. From promoting respect for human rights to protecting our national security, sanctions are a vital part of a great many of our international strategies.

As I set out in the opening speech, the regulations provide the legal basis that enables us to carry out our independent sanctions policy within the framework of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act. Approval of these regulations will help to preserve our status as a global leader in this field. More than that, it will mean that we can stand with the EU and other international partners and act together to ensure that unacceptable behaviour—violation of human rights, violation of the rule of law, and threats to prosperity and security—do not go unchecked or unchallenged. I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 608), dated 18 June 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 June, be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With the leave of the House, I will put the Questions on the remaining eight motions together.

Resolved,

That the Burundi (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 1142), dated 18 July 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 19 July 2019, in the last Parliament, be approved.

That the Cyber (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 597), dated 15 June 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 17 June, be approved.

That the Guinea (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 1145), dated 18 July 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 19 July 2019, in the last Parliament, be approved.

That the Misappropriation (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1468), dated 7 December 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 9 December, be approved.

That the Nicaragua (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 610), dated 18 June 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 June, be approved.

That the Sanctions (EU Exit) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 590), dated 11 June 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 15 June, be approved.

That the Sanctions (EU Exit) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (No. 4) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 951), dated 3 September 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 8 September, be approved.

That the Unauthorised Drilling Activities in the Eastern Mediterranean (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1474), dated 7 December 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 11 December, be approved.—(*James Cleverly.*)

2.43 pm

Sitting suspended.

Exiting the European Union (Value Added Tax)

2.46 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): I beg to move,

That the Value Added Tax (Miscellaneous Amendments to Acts of Parliament) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1312), dated 18 November 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 19 November, be approved.

Mr Speaker: With this we will take the following motion:

That the Value Added Tax (Miscellaneous Amendments to the Value Added Tax Act 1994 and Revocation) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1544), dated 18 December 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 21 December, be approved.

Jesse Norman: These two statutory instruments are part of a package of measures connected to the UK's exit from the EU. They make a number of consequential and necessary changes in order to ensure that the VAT system continued and continues to operate, as required, following the end of the transition period. They have been designed to ensure fairness, to protect against double taxation and avoidance, and to make certain that existing reliefs continue to apply following the UK's departure from the EU. Both instruments took effect at the end of the transition period.

The Value Added Tax (Miscellaneous Amendments to Acts of Parliament) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 make three changes to the VAT Act 1994 and one change to the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018. The first change applies to the VAT treatment of aircraft handling services. Until the end of the transition period, the VAT Act included a VAT zero rate for handling services supplied to aircraft operating on international routes. These included landing and housing fees, security and fire services. This zero-rate band also applied to the handling and storage of goods carried in those aircraft, but only at a customs and excise airport. However, suppliers could previously rely on EU legislation to zero-rate their services at non-customs and excise airports. This instrument therefore provides for the continued application of the relief in UK legislation following the end of the transition period.

Secondly, this instrument includes a new VAT zero rate for the handling services supplied to international trains. These include network track access, shunting and storage, station and guard services, light maintenance services and the handling and storage of goods carried on the trains. The measure aligns the VAT treatment of international trains with that of qualifying ships and aircraft. For ships and aircraft, services for which the zero rate applies can be carried out only at a port or airport, but for international trains these services could be supplied at various other sites along a rail route. The instrument therefore provides a power for the Revenue and Customs commissioners to specify those sites in a notice. That will ensure that the relief applies appropriately to trains.

Thirdly, the instrument makes a change that allows those supplying pension fund management services to funds established in the EU to recover the VAT that they incur.

[Jesse Norman]

Finally, the instrument removes a change made in the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018 to the VAT treatment of certain travel services. The change is no longer necessary because the subsequent Value Added Tax (Tour Operators) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 included a revision of the VAT treatment of such services.

Let me turn to the second instrument to be debated: the Value Added Tax (Miscellaneous Amendments to the Value Added Tax Act 1994 and Revocation) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020. This legislation includes four changes to the Value Added Tax Act 1994 and the revocation of an instrument laid in 2019 in connection with EU exit.

First, the legislation makes changes to the DIY house builders' scheme to place self-builders in Northern Ireland in the same position as those in Great Britain. The DIY house builders' scheme allows people who construct their own dwellings—a relevant residential or charitable building—or make a residential conversion to claim back the VAT on certain building materials, including VAT incurred on imports. Under the Northern Ireland protocol, materials bought by self-builders in Northern Ireland from suppliers in an EU member state may be subject to VAT in Northern Ireland. The instrument ensures that a DIY house builder in Northern Ireland can recover VAT charged on materials bought from a supplier in an EU member state.

Secondly, the instrument allows HMRC to obtain information in relation to VAT owed by businesses and individuals in member states. Similar legislation applied to the whole of the UK until the end of the transition period, reflecting the requirement for mutual co-operation between member states in connection with VAT. The retention of the legislation, particularly in respect of Northern Ireland, is a requirement of the withdrawal agreement.

Thirdly, the instrument contains measures to prevent unscrupulous businesses from avoiding import VAT. Under the Government's commitment to unfettered access, goods in free circulation in Northern Ireland that are moved to Great Britain are relieved from duty and VAT on entry. However, UK customs legislation contains a provision to remove the duty relief if it is found that goods have been routed from an EU member state via Northern Ireland to Great Britain in order to avoid import duty. The instrument ensures that, if the customs provision is triggered, the VAT relief will no longer apply as well. It also prevents double taxation for businesses that make exempt supplies and move goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland.

Finally, the instrument revokes the Finance Act 2011, Schedule 23 (Data-gathering Powers) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid in the event of a no-deal scenario and are therefore no longer required.

The instruments provide a number of significant and necessary changes to ensure that the VAT system continues to operate as required following the end of the transition period. They will ensure fairness, protect against double taxation and avoidance, and make certain that existing reliefs continue to apply. I hope colleagues will join me in supporting this legislation, which I commend to the House.

2.54 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I am grateful for the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Opposition to these two statutory instruments. Our priority, as the Opposition, is to ensure that the UK economy functions as smoothly as possible and that the Northern Ireland protocol operates effectively following the end EU exit transition period. We will therefore not oppose the Government on these two statutory instruments.

As we have heard, the first of these sets of regulations includes changes to replicate in domestic law the measures that currently exist in EU law. They make provision in UK law for a VAT zero rate for the handling of qualifying aircraft at non-customs and excise airports, as businesses can no longer rely on EU law to provide that measure. Other measures in this set of regulations make more substantive changes. The introduction of a VAT zero rate for the handling of international trains is new, although in practice it is similar to the relief for aircraft. The removal of a VAT exemption for suppliers of pension fund management services for funds established in the EU is also substantive, although it was predicted when the VAT exemption for pension fund management services was introduced in UK law last year.

As those two points represent substantial changes, will the Minister say what assessment the Treasury has made of the impact on the tax base of these regulations? On the one hand, there will presumably be a loss of revenue as a result of the zero rating for handling of international trains, while on the other, the removal of the exemption for EU-established pension fund management services will presumably generate income for the Exchequer. Will he therefore set out what impact, separately and net, these changes are expected to have on the tax base?

The second set of regulations makes changes to the Value Added Tax Act 1994 needed following the end of the EU exit transition period in the context of the Northern Ireland protocol. As we have heard, the measures in this instrument will ensure that VAT can be recovered by DIY house builders in Northern Ireland on goods used in construction purchased in the EU. It will also remove VAT relief for goods moved from Northern Ireland to Great Britain for avoidance purposes and ensure that recovery is possible if VAT is incurred when a business moves its own goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland.

As I made clear, the Opposition want to see the Northern Ireland protocol operating effectively and we want people in Northern Ireland to be protected from disruption to their lives and their businesses. While these changes are therefore welcome, it is vital that businesses are supported in understanding and being able to follow the new arrangements they face. The Minister will know that my Opposition colleagues have been calling on the Government to support a major and effective information campaign for British businesses about the new rules on trade with Northern Ireland and to increase capacity at the Trader Support Service to help businesses to complete new customs declarations. In the light of the disruption we have seen since the end of the transition period, will the Minister set out what extra support the Government have decided to put in place since the beginning of this year? Can he confirm specifically whether, since 1 January, there have been any substantive changes to the Government's communication

strategy for British businesses about the new rules on trade with Northern Ireland or increases in capacity at the Trader Support Service? These are important questions to ensure that the protocol operates effectively, and I would welcome the Minister's addressing them directly.

2.57 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: The SNP will not oppose these motions either, because, as with most statutory instruments, the choice is to approve or reject them in their entirety, and rejecting them in their entirety would mean failing to address some serious gaps in legislation left by the Government's shambolic handling of Brexit.

Most of the first set of regulations, SI No. 1312, is non-contentious. In fact, if we are honest, most of it is necessary to put right yet another great British Brexit blunder. The now Foreign Secretary and former Brexit Secretary did not realise that we needed lots of boats at Dover to do cross-channel trade. Now we find that Treasury Ministers knew they had to legislate for goods crossing the channel on planes and boats but forgot that goods could also get across the channel in the channel tunnel on a train. Regulations 2 to 8—most of this SI—are almost entirely about correcting that blunder.

Regulation 10, which the Opposition spokesperson mentioned, concerns me. I hope that the Minister will be able to give some reassurances about who it will affect and how much it will affect them. The regulation removes the VAT exemption on fees charged for the management of qualifying pension funds established in an EU member state. The explanatory notes say that the change is necessary as a consequence of withdrawal from the European Union. Will the Minister expand on exactly why it is a necessary consequence? Surely the exemption could have been retained as part of the trade deal the Government are so proud of. Did the Government actively seek to end the exemption, did they try to retain it but have to negotiate it away during the negotiations, or did they just completely forget about it, as they seem to have completely forgotten about so much else? Is it necessary because the Government want to do it or because they have sleepwalked into a situation where they are, in effect, forced to do it? What assessment have they made of the impact of the removal of this exemption? Do they know how many people in the UK have their pensions managed by EU-based funds, possibly without the pension holder even realising it? What is the total value of such funds? How much additional tax does the Treasury expect will become due as a result of this proposal?

Pension holders affected by this change went into a long-term relationship with their pension fund based on the VAT rules that applied at the time. They had a reasonable expectation that the rules would not be significantly changed during the term of their pension, but they are now being told that the rules have been changed and it is up to their pension fund to cough up the tax that becomes due. It may not technically fit the definition of "retrospective legislation", but that is what it will feel like to those people.

As well as the impact on UK residents whose pensions are managed by EU-based funds, what happens in the converse situation? Presumably, it will also be necessary for every EU member state to now start charging VAT on the management fees for every pension fund that an

EU resident holds with a UK pension manager. I imagine that this will be a bigger issue. So what assessment have the Government made of the value to the UK economy of the big financial centres, such as Edinburgh and London, selling their pension management expertise to the European Union? What assessment have the Government made of the impact on the competitiveness of that part of our financial services industry if its customers are to start paying VAT and its competitors do not?

I turn to the second of the statutory instruments, the Value Added Tax (Miscellaneous Amendments to the Value Added Tax Act 1994 and Revocation) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020. All the amendments to legislation proposed here appear reasonable and necessary for the smooth operation of the Northern Ireland protocol. In that regard, may I urge those calling for the protocol to be completely scrapped to ask themselves: whose interests would be served by the British Government welching on such an important international agreement almost before the ink has even dried on it? The protocol is flawed, for two reasons: it attempts to resolve an almost insoluble contradiction, which the Government have continuously refused to acknowledge; and, like almost everything else of critical importance to Northern Ireland during the Brexit process, it was thrown together at the last minute.

This statutory instrument is needed because we saw exactly the same kind of last-minute rush job just before Christmas with the Taxation (Post-transition Period) Act 2020. That Act passed its entire proceedings in this House in about four and a half hours. Under the rules of the House at that time, virtual participation in debate was not allowed, so inevitably the number of Members who could take part was reduced and the degree of scrutiny afforded to the Bill was affected. The scrutiny was so affected that the day after that Act had received Royal Assent the Government had already had to table this statutory instrument to correct mistakes in their own legislation. Provisions that were essential to allow the economy in Northern Ireland to continue to operate were thrown together at the last minute. We should never forget that the unique concessions the Government have made to Northern Ireland in the Brexit process were not made out of any respect for the will of the people there; they were made because the Government's original intended solution of acting unlawfully and tearing up international treaties eventually became a step too far even for some of their own most loyal supporters. Although we welcome the fact that the Government have been forced to give some recognition to the will of the people of Northern Ireland, who never voted for this Brexit chaos, surely they deserve better than to be continually treated as an afterthought.

These two sets of regulations are necessary to make up for the incompetence of the Government of a wannabe global power, who did not realise that boats were a useful way for people on an island to trade across its sea borders. This Government also then forgot there was a tunnel so that people could also cross a sea border on a train, and they still continually forget that 1.8 million of their own citizens do not need to cross the sea to get to the EU; they have only to cross the road. My final question to the Minister is: how many more pieces of additional legislation are we going to have to approve in order to clear up after this Government's incompetence?

3.4 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: I have declared my business interests in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

As the Minister has told us, these are two important statutory instruments for the facilitation of trade generally and for the facilitation of trade within Northern Ireland and between GB and Northern Ireland, and to the extent that they make things easier and allow zero rating of important services and goods, I welcome them wholeheartedly. But, of course, as others have said in this debate, we meet today against the background of clear difficulties and problems in the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol, where it appears that a number of important impediments to GB-Northern Ireland trade have been inserted, and it is crucial that the talks go well and we get rid of them as quickly as possible.

So when we look at the administration of VAT, which is an important part of the trade process, I would like an assurance from the Minister that these regulations, and all the other VAT and excise rules applying in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom, will be solely administered and enforced by United Kingdom authorities, because I have much more confidence in them. Will he also assure me that the aim of these statutory instruments, and the wider VAT legislation that they add to and amend, is to ensure that the movement of goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, or the other way, will be as smooth and easy as the movement from London to Surrey or from Manchester to north Wales, because that is what I thought we had agreed and signed up to—that Northern Ireland was a fully integrated part of the United Kingdom single market, under our single market and taxation rules? I would like the reassurance through these statutory instruments that we are intending for that to be true.

Will the Minister also confirm that there has for many years during our period in the European Union been an important VAT border between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, but that it has always worked very smoothly and was not enforced at the physical border, in accordance with the spirit of agreements and not wanting barriers at the land border? It was an electronic border and adjustments were made by computer or by correspondence so that these things could be sorted out in a sensible and decent manner without having to have people queuing at borders to make complex calculations and submissions. If that is the case, does the Minister agree that it is in that spirit that we need to find the answer to the current impositions and difficulties affecting our trade across those borders? It seems very odd that we cannot replicate that success of our past trading, where electronic manifests, trusted trader schemes and so forth, and proper electronic VAT registration worked very well. Surely the UK authorities, if we are the proper and sole enforcement authority in Northern Ireland, can work with trusted traders, VAT-registered hauliers and ferry companies and so forth, and we can accept their certification or word that the goods on their load are entirely GB-Northern Ireland or Northern Ireland-GB. We can then accept, therefore, that there are no other considerations and the loads can then move as smoothly as from London to Guildford or Manchester to north Wales. It would be very helpful to hear the Minister's views on how that can be achieved and how quickly we can get to that point.

It is absolutely crucial to the people of Northern Ireland, as we have heard from their representatives, that they can trade smoothly with the rest of the United Kingdom. That was fundamental to the spirit of the agreements that the United Kingdom entered into with the European Union over the issue of trade with and between Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I hope the Minister will have good news for us and that these things can be sorted out quickly.

3.8 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): May I first echo the point made by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) that, as the implications of the protocol become ever more apparent, it becomes ever clearer that the promises made to the people in Northern Ireland that they can trade as freely with GB as they did before 1 January and that they will be regarded as fully part of the UK internal market, are not true? There is a border on the Irish sea. There is disruption of trade between Northern Ireland and GB, and vice versa. While the Prime Minister and the Government will maintain that the Union between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom has not been affected, the truth of the matter is that the people of Northern Ireland are not experiencing the full benefits of being United Kingdom citizens that they had before 31 January.

Indeed, the regulations illustrate some of the issues that are still going to be faced by people and businesses in Northern Ireland. I welcome the fact that the Government have tried, at least, to overcome some of the implications of the protocol, but I say to the Minister that this kind of tinkering through VAT regulations will not answer the issues that people in Northern Ireland face.

Let me go through some of the issues that the regulations deal with. First, if DIY builders bring in materials—probably most commonly, in Northern Ireland, from the Irish Republic—that are subject to VAT, they will be able to claim back that VAT. What assessment has been made of the additional work that anyone will have to undertake in order to show the VAT that was payable in the Irish Republic or, indeed, in some other EU member state so that it can be claimed back under these regulations?

Do not forget that we are talking about DIY builders. I think of a constituent who came to me just this week because of a delay in the payment of the VAT refund that he was owed on a house that he had built over a period of years. As money became available to him, he built more and more of the house, and the VAT was outstanding. Even with the current regime, the paperwork involved was quite substantial, but he was doing it by himself; he was not a professional. Now we have this added complication. Other Members have talked about the need for clarification. What clarification will there be for people in such situations about what information they need to gather and the way in which it should be gathered?

The second issue is the supply of goods into Northern Ireland—the VAT that is required to be paid on them if they are moving on into the EU, and the fact that VAT can be refunded where the goods are staying in Northern Ireland although they might have been VAT-able.

I think of another example that was brought to me this week, by people involved in the aerospace industry in Northern Ireland. When they bring in aluminium from GB, they have to pay the VAT on it because, under

the protocol, it is now coming into a part of the United Kingdom that is deemed to be subject to the EU VAT regime. When that aluminium goes into aircraft parts, the parts do not have any VAT on them, but until it goes into the parts and the parts are sold, those people are obliged to pay out the VAT on it.

That, of course, can be quite a substantial amount of money. It causes cash flow problems and leads to additional administration. I am not so sure that what is provided for in this legislation deals with that problem, because until those people can show either that the aluminium has been incorporated into the parts or that those parts are not going somewhere where they are eligible for European taxes, they have to make the payments.

The Minister is right that we have to close the loophole between Northern Ireland and GB for those who would seek to use Northern Ireland as a back door to escape paying VAT on goods that may be zero-rated in the United Kingdom. Again, what will that mean in terms of checks on goods coming through Northern Ireland ports to GB? How will it be determined that those goods have not originated in the Republic, as opposed to Northern Ireland? Will all Northern Ireland suppliers of goods into GB have to go through a process to show that the goods were made in Northern Ireland and are therefore exempt from VAT, or had had UK VAT rates applied to them? What additional checks and administrative burdens will that cause for businesses?

In relation to how HMRC has handled this issue, all the information I have from the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland is that businesses are still confused. They do not know what is required of them. They do not know what paperwork will be required, how they claim exemptions and so on. There is a huge piece of work to be done. I come to the point that, despite what the Scottish National party spokesperson has said, we cannot hang on to this protocol. It is damaging relations within Northern Ireland, damaging the Northern Ireland economy and adding substantially to the requirements for businesses. This legislation shows that there will be additional requirements on businesses in Northern Ireland, which make trading more expensive.

The protocol is not some advantage or gift, as the Scottish National party would seek to try to present it to the people of Northern Ireland; it is poison to the people of Northern Ireland. It has poisoned relationships. In my constituency, we are finding that workers are under threat at the ports, such is the frustration and anger. That was never taken into consideration when the Unionist population of Northern Ireland was cynically set aside to get a quick deal with the EU on the basis that the important border was the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, rather than the relationship that Northern Ireland has with its own country.

What are the implications for people who build their own houses in claiming VAT? They are bringing supplies in from, presumably, mostly the Irish Republic. What are the administrative implications for them? What are the implications for those businesses bringing in supplies from GB, for which VAT will have to be paid and then reclaimed at some later date? What exemptions can be made where it is quite clear that the goods are not going into the EU or that the materials are going into something that will never be VAT-able anyhow? How can we overcome that issue?

If the Government are going to close Northern Ireland as a back door into GB for those products from the European Union that are being routed through Northern Ireland to avoid UK taxes, what implications, if any, does that have for suppliers in Northern Ireland? If it has no implications, how do the Government intend to differentiate goods that are coming through the Republic into Northern Ireland from goods that are going purely from Northern Ireland to GB?

I implore the Minister to take this message back: as far as the protocol is concerned, we can have this continual tinkering, but it will not deal with its underlying, systemic and fundamental problems—that Northern Ireland is still subject to a large amount of law that originates outside its own country, which eats into the very heart of economic activity and undermines its constitutional position within the United Kingdom.

3.19 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and, indeed, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). I confess that it was a surprise to hear the right hon. Member for Wokingham say that this was not something that he thought he had voted for. That contrasts somewhat sharply with the clarity of his position in recent years, but he can explain that for himself.

The right hon. Member for East Antrim is right that the arrangements bring an extraordinary level of complexity, and they do create that border down the Irish sea, which just months ago we were assured would never be the case. Of course, any objective observer could see that there was always going to have to be a border somewhere. That is what happens when unions start to be broken up—borders are put in. The border either had to be between the north and the south in Ireland or down the Irish sea, or else we could have chosen to remain part of the customs union. That was a political choice that the Government resolutely refused to make and, as a consequence of that political choice, businesses and private individuals now have to face the sheer range of complexities with which we are having to deal today, some of them even retrospectively. I hope that those who find themselves in that position—I will touch on a couple of constituency examples in a second—will bear in mind that this is not just a matter of administrative arrangements; we are dealing here with political choices.

I want to touch first on the VAT retail export scheme, which ended on 1 January. Under previous arrangements, overseas visitors were able to obtain a VAT refund on items that they had bought in Britain to take home with them in their luggage. The loss of that scheme risks seeing the loss of a significant amount of consumer spending in our economy. The scheme contributed literally billions of pounds to the British economy, helped to create thousands of jobs and ensured that the UK was one of the most attractive international shopping destinations globally. Scrapping it, especially in today's economic climate, is in our view a huge error.

In the past, we have been able to attract high-spending overseas tourists. It has been a highly successful economic strategy, used by every other European country. International shoppers spend upwards of £6 billion annually in the UK. This has kept our cities on an equal footing with international competitors such as Paris,

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

Milan and Madrid. However, by removing this incentive, we will boost our competitors and detract from the UK's international appeal.

This is not just about London and Heathrow; the impact will be felt across the United Kingdom. According to the Centre for Economics and Business Research, Edinburgh will face an annual loss of £92 million; Manchester an annual loss of £60 million; Liverpool an annual loss of £32 million; and Leeds an annual loss of £18 million. The effect on jobs will be significant. The initial hit will be on retail and tourism, but that will eventually spill over into related sectors such as hospitality and manufacturing.

Tourism industry bodies warn that 70,000 jobs are in immediate jeopardy throughout the UK, while the CEBR estimate was almost double that. This is a huge and unnecessary risk for British workers and businesses. I pay warm tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), who, as the MP for Edinburgh airport, has been leading the charge on this issue. It is important that we hear from the Government how they intend to address the consequences of the political decisions that they have taken.

Another point I want to bring to the House's attention comes from constituents who are, by and large, small single-person or very-few-person businesses seeking to export online. I was approached recently by a knitwear exporter. Knitwear, of course, is culturally and economically very important to Shetland for trade. She tells me that the advice that has been given by HMRC is that a one-stop shop will eventually be available, possibly from 1 July, to deal with the issues around the collection of VAT on online sales to the European Union. She has been told that, in the meantime, she has three options. A UK retailer can open an office or agency in one of the EU countries and collect VAT through it. Alternatively, they can choose not to levy the VAT on EU customers. In that case, the customer is levied the VAT by their domestic officials as an import tax before taking delivery of their purchases. That again illustrates the administrative burden that falls on small businesses such as the one run by my constituent. She tells me in an email:

"I predict that this will kill most small businesses trying to export to the EU. The end customer has to cope with a lot of paperwork and stress and most of the time doesn't understand what's going on. I've already had some irate emails and I suspect I have lost those customers (although they have bought from me 3 or 4 times in the past). Customs officials aren't up to date on the arrangements. A German customer found out for me yesterday that even if I put shipping cost into the purchase price of the goods and declare 'free shipping' on the invoice, the customs officials will estimate the shipping cost and add that to the total on which VAT has to be paid. 'Free Shipping' helps sales. The potential customer knows what the final price will be when looking at product page. Customers who don't complete their purchase at the checkout are most often deterred by the shipping cost that suddenly appears... This is fact, well known, well documented. We need to be able to continue operating with 'free shipping' without customs officials in other countries estimating shipping costs and adding that to the total taxable amount."

That is just one small illustration of the challenges that are now being faced by small businesses the length and breadth of the country that are already struggling to make ends meet as a consequence of the economic challenges thrown up by the pandemic. These problems are only going to get worse. These businesses are fighting

hard to compete with other businesses across the European Union that have none of those challenges. When the Minister comes to reply to the debate, what news can he give us about the one-stop shop that HMRC is offering to businesses such as the one run by my constituent? Can he guarantee that it will in fact be set up by 1 July? What else is he going to do to ensure that the administrative consequences of his political decisions and those of the rest of his Government are not left as a tab to be picked up by small businesses across the UK?

3.28 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): These measures are clearly part of a proper package that is being presented by the Government today. I particularly welcome the first instrument, which extends the zero rating on aircraft, because that is particularly important for Teesside airport and for Newcastle airport, both of which have employees in my constituency. As a former special adviser to the Department for Transport, I also welcome the new zero rating for international rail, and I would like to hear from the Minister what impact he expects that to have on jobs in the UK. Will he also tell us what impact he expects the changes to the pension fund services to have on good jobs and revenue for the Exchequer? On the second instrument, it is pretty clear that Members across the House support the essential measures to stop tax avoidance, although there have been questions from the Opposition.

With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I might just stray slightly, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) did, into the wider debate on VAT-free sales to non-EU visitors and the extra cash that is being raised from the VAT charged in the UK. I can quite understand why the Government are taking the decisions that they are, but with £1.4 billion at stake it seems pretty clear to me why we would not reverse that decision.

I would like to mention a couple of points regarding small businesses in my constituency. GetDressedForBattle is a small family business based in Consett, and Lanchester Wines is one of the largest businesses and employers in my constituency, although it sits just outside my area. Both companies have faced issues with customs and excise over recent months. I ask the Minister to ensure that customs and excise staff are not being over-zealous since our departure from the EU, and to ensure simplification and speed in our customs and excise arrangements wherever possible so that small businesses can continue to export and create jobs in the United Kingdom.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Jim Shannon.

3.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; that was a quick swap-over.

I want to express concern about something that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) referred to: the confusion that clearly reigns in Northern Ireland in relation to VAT. I hold constituency surgeries every Saturday when I am back home. The one that I hold in Portavogie involves fishermen, and a fisherman recently came to me saying, "I can't understand, Jim, what this VAT registration is to do with. I am already

registered for VAT.” I said, “Well, I think this is probably to do with the EU, Brexit and where we stand.” He then phoned HMRC, but had real bother trying to get any clarification whatsoever; first he was waiting and then the line went dead. I have some concerns for the people—fishermen, but others as well—who really do not understand the EU VAT regime, the UK VAT regime or the implications for their businesses.

The Minister is always generous in responding to our questions, so perhaps he could clarify this matter for me and my constituents. Will he outline the position of Northern Ireland in relation to regulations 3 to 9 under “Amendment of Group 8 of Schedule 8 to the Value Added Tax Act 1994”, which make

“provision in connection with the United Kingdom’s exit from the EU”,

and mean that we find ourselves being taxed through VAT for goods, yet paying customs on parcels from the mainland? Let me give some quick examples; there are plenty, but I will just give two.

I have a constituent who gets leather from a company in Newcastle upon Tyne in the north of England. Indeed, I suspect that that might not be too far away from the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden). Orders usually come in about three parcels, each weighing about 20 kg to 30 kg. The courier price has gone up from precisely £13.50 to £16.50 plus VAT. But the new price for the product—the best the leather supplier can give—is an estimated minimum of £75 plus VAT, and other taxes that may be imposed by HMRC mean a cost of at least £90 inclusive per parcel. That is a real deviation and a problem for our constituents—an almost sixfold increase. The courier company says that most of the price increase is due to all the customs paperwork it now has to complete. Can we have some clarification from the Minister on the confusion that seems to reign?

I was speaking to another constituent yesterday, who every year orders items from a horse goods supplier across the water. She usually orders from one person, but this time she applied to four people. Two could not do it, one did not answer and the one who did answer said, “The product is £30, but we are going to have to add £42 for the VAT and service charges, so the cost will now be £72.” My constituent was able to go online and order the product from the United States of America at a comparable price to the original—around the £30 mark.

A further example—I think I said two, but there are actually three—is of a constituent who wanted to send a car part across from England. It needs to come on a pallet, weighing 50 kg. He was advised by the shipping agent that he would have to pay £45 plus VAT for customs clearance. The charge is more than the part is worth. This again highlights something that we need clarification on. He is absolutely astonished that this is the case within the United Kingdom, and so am I.

I hope I have caught this right in relation to the issue about VAT and suppliers—my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim referred to it as well—and that those who buy cement, wood, concrete, building blocks and so on from the Republic of Ireland can reclaim their VAT. If that is the case, that answers one of my queries in an earlier exchange on this matter, just before Christmas, I think it was. If that is sorted and the VAT repayment that my right hon. Friend referred to can be done quickly, urgently and on the timescale that it should be, that would be good news.

The statutory instrument extends zero VAT to certain sectors. I highlight the inadequacy of this SI, and through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, query whether the Minister agrees that this measure should be extended to all products coming into Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK in any form of haulage or transportation, in the light of the customs expectation, which sees products costing six times the price, post the Irish sea border. These are real issues that affect the pockets of my constituents, those of my right hon. Friend and indeed people across the whole of Northern Ireland. I urge the Minister to go back to the Cabinet and raise the fact that these SIs do not provide parity for Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom, yet we pay tax and customs. Other steps must be urgently taken.

I have to express these concerns on behalf of my constituents. I am sorry to do so. I hope the Minister will give us the clarification we need. We are 34 days into the Northern Ireland protocol, and boy, is it hard to understand.

3.37 pm

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members who contributed to the debate, which has been constructive and useful. I am also grateful to the Opposition for their support for this measure, and to the Scottish National party.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) asked about the assessment of the impact of these measures on the income tax—I think he means VAT—base. Of course, being a diligent soul, he will undoubtedly have carefully cosseted the tax impact and information note and seen that no significant impact is expected from this, because the VAT will have been recovered in any case by a VAT-registered business, or would have been recovered otherwise. This set of measures in many ways merely restores the status quo. He asked a question that was indirectly raised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), about, as it were, potential confusion in Northern Ireland. The trader support service is functioning, in relation to advising on imports, extremely well overall. It has been heavily supported by the UK Government, as the hon. Member for Ealing North will know, and offers what is in effect a globally unique facilitation and intervention.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) was very free in accusing the Government of incompetence, as is the way with his party. Knowing that he would wish to be competent himself, I encourage him to read the tax impact and information note. He will know that these measures are already in the protocol and are therefore already, as it were, incorporated via the protocol in UK law. No new impacts are expected from the legislation, as those tax impact and information notes set out.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) asked whether VAT rules will be administered and enforced by the UK Government. They will, through Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. He rightly raised wider concerns about Northern Ireland and some of the events we have seen in the last few days. I would refer him and all Members to the comprehensive remarks made by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster yesterday in response to the urgent question on the topic. He also asked whether there would be easy

[*Jesse Norman*]

movement. He will know that we have put in place unfettered access for Northern Irish exports into Great Britain and a very comprehensive set of measures to support and facilitate imports into Northern Ireland and to reduce any possible administrative burden.

Sammy Wilson *rose*—

Jesse Norman: The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) wishes to intervene, so I invite him to do so before I come to his remarks.

Sammy Wilson: I thank the Minister for giving way, and I hope he will address some of the points I raised. It is right that HMRC will be in charge of the collection of VAT, but one of the problems appears to be that, while we have the trader support service in Northern Ireland—which in most cases, but not always, has been helpful in giving advice to businesses there—many businesses in GB have not had the same level of information. One of the reasons why some of those businesses are saying that they are not going to sell to Northern Ireland is simply that they believe that the processes are so complicated, and they have no support by either having that clarified or being assured that the customs declarations and all the other paperwork will not be as complicated as they think it will be.

Jesse Norman: It is very easy to overstate the complexity of the issues involved. In the cases that the right hon. Gentleman mentions, the Northern Irish partner has full access to the trader support service, and the Great British partner has a comprehensive amount of guidance online, so the two come together. Inevitably, people will take some time to get used to what is, after all, a change in the arrangements. He is right to pick up the point about the effectiveness of the TSS. I do not think there is a suggestion that the support that businesses have been given in terms of information is anything less than comprehensive.

The right hon. Member for East Antrim asked about do-it-yourself builders. I can confirm that no further information will be required from do-it-yourself house builders, who will file a single VAT return. Obviously, they will be subject to the same proof of payment as they would have been before. In general, the point of this scheme is that without it, they would not be able to deduct acquisition VAT as they could prior to the end of transition period. Through this scheme, they can continue to recover the same VAT as they could before, therefore it is thoroughly to be welcomed.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) asked about VAT RES. I am very sorry, but that was in the wrong debate. If he had held his horses, he could have raised that in the next debate, or he could have raised it—equally inappropriately—in the previous debate, which I see he was down to speak in. The good news is that my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary will address these issues comprehensively in the debate to follow.

On the issue of small exporters, exports are zero-rated in relation to the UK, and they are not the principal topic of the legislation that we are discussing. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland will be aware that there are measures coming from the EU in July, as I understand it, in relation to these matters that will to some extent—we wait to see the detail—mirror the facilitations that have been put in place, and they will hopefully support exporters from his constituency into the EU.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) again raised the question about jobs and revenue. He will see that the tax information impact note does not expect there to be a significant material difference with regard to these issues, but there might, of course, have been some impact had we not put the facilitations in place and therefore these preserve the status quo, and rightly so.

I have already touched on some of the issues relating to the confusion over VAT that was raised by the hon. Member for Strangford). As he knows, in relation to imports, we have the Trader Support Service and, in relation to exports, there is comprehensive guidance available for anyone seeking to export.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Value Added Tax (Miscellaneous Amendments to Acts of Parliament) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1312), dated 18 November 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 19 November, be approved.

Resolved,

That the Value Added Tax (Miscellaneous Amendments to the Value Added Tax Act 1994 and Revocation) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1544), dated 18 December 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 21 December, be approved.—(*Jesse Norman.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am suspending the House for a few minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

3.45 pm

Sitting suspended.

Exiting the European Union (Excise)

3.50 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I will be calling Gavin Newlands shortly, but I warn Back-Bench Members that I will be imposing a five-minute time limit straight away—this is a short, 90-minute debate—to allow time for the Front-Bench spokespeople. When the time limit is in effect, there will be a countdown clock visible on the screens of hon. Members participating virtually and, of course, on the screens in the Chamber.

3.51 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: I beg to move,

That the Travellers' Allowances and Miscellaneous Provisions (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (SI, 2020, No. 1412), dated 3 December 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 3 December 2020, be revoked.

We fully support the extension of duty-free shopping for people travelling to the EU, which is surely the thinnest of silver linings on the huge, grey thundercloud that is Brexit. However, the withdrawal of the VAT retail export scheme and the airside extra-statutory concession represents a real threat to thousands of jobs across Scotland and the UK.

The Treasury's own consultation showed that an overwhelming majority of respondents were against the abolition of RES. It is trying to grab us with the HMRC guidance on the measures stating that the withdrawal "may have a marginal impact on retailers in Great Britain."

But even the Office for Budget Responsibility found that the Treasury has not taken into account the indirect impact on businesses outside the retail sector, showing the modelling undertaken by the Treasury to be fundamentally flawed and based on entirely incorrect assumptions and figures. The supply chain considerations are completely missing from the HMRC statement, with not a word about the manufacturers and suppliers outside of direct retail that will find their bottom line impacted by the disappearance of RES as we know it.

Nor has HMRC shown itself to be entirely accurate in its understanding of the fiscal impact of abolition. Its technical note conflates the number of sales with the number of passengers, underestimating the use of RES by up to 75%. It focuses on the direct benefits to London and Bicester Village, ignoring the indirect impact on travellers from regional airports transiting to their final destination outside the EU, thus underestimating the demand for the extra-statutory concession at these airports.

In short, the attempts of HMRC and the Treasury to justify their decision smack of a post facto race to find facts that fit their narrative, rather than a proper analysis of the pros and cons of both the retail export scheme and the extra-statutory concession. Anybody who thinks this is purely about high-end retailers and retail rent income at airports is ignoring the implications for businesses up and down the land, which are robbed of outlets and goods and seeing demand from overseas visitors shrivel when it should be increasing as we move out of the pandemic.

That is not a good starting point for the Treasury's actions, and it does not take a world-leading economist to see that two of the industries hardest hit by the pandemic are retail and aviation. The abolition of RES is another blow to each of them. It is perhaps not

game-changing in isolation, but it is yet more chipping away at the foundations of employment in my constituency and right across the country.

Edinburgh's Princes Street, to take one example, has in the past few weeks seen Debenhams and the city institution Jenners fall victim to the pressure on retail, not just from the pandemic but from the wider trends across the sector. Removing RES will hit shopping in the city even harder and will cause even more jobs to be lost at a time when hundreds are already going.

Let me address the way in which the decision was taken. There was no engagement whatsoever with the Scottish Government or, presumably, with any other devolved Government, despite the obvious implications for our retail and tourism sectors. That is utterly disrespectful and counterproductive. I want to see all these decisions taken for Scotland, by Scotland, and while we are part of this Union, it should be incumbent on the Treasury and every UK Government Department at least to speak to their counterparts in the devolved Governments about proposals that will have a serious and detrimental impact on their citizens. If they had engaged, they would have heard the Scottish Government's real concerns. Scottish Finance Secretary Kate Forbes was clear as soon as she heard of the changes that she did not and does not

"believe that this is an appropriate juncture at which to make such an abrupt and significant change."

The director of the Scottish Retail Consortium, David Lonsdale, raised the impact that the policy could have on tax-free shopping in Scotland's cities. He said:

"The Finance Secretary's comments are a timely and welcome intervention in support of city centres...The decision could cost Edinburgh city centre, for example, many millions in lost retail sales, let alone the knock-on impact on tourism...This decision would leave the UK as the only European country not to provide a tax-free shopping scheme to encourage tourism. There is a good reason no other European nation has taken this step, and we urge swift reconsideration."

He is right. Other European countries will take advantage of this short-sighted decision.

Warnings are coming from right across the UK. The president of the UK Travel Retail Forum, Francois Bourienne, said the decision would put

"the UK out of step with travel retail systems around the world" and

"completely disincentivises tourists to visit the UK and British passengers making purchases as they go on vacation abroad. It puts UK airports and travel retail at a substantial disadvantage against their European counterparts after Brexit. This will lead to significant additional job losses in the travel industry."

Hand in hand with the abolition of the retail export scheme is the scrapping of the extra-statutory concession. Again, the consultation found overwhelming—in fact, near-unanimous—support for the continuation of some form of the concession after Brexit, and again the Treasury ignored those responses. Again, we are seeing the chipping away of revenue streams that employ thousands of people throughout the country and are vital for many airports.

Regional airports depend on the revenue from airside shopping to a far greater degree than the Heathrows of this world—in fact, up to 40% of a smaller airport's revenue is generated through retail, as a higher proportion of its passengers fly point to point rather than domestically through a hub such as Heathrow. The kicking away of this financial crutch at a time of huge pressure on the

[Gavin Newlands]

finances of airports is another blow to an industry that is reeling from the pandemic and, in the case of many regional airports in England, still dealing with the after-effects of the collapse of Flybe.

In Scotland, it is estimated that the abolition of the ESC will potentially result in the closure of most retail outlets at airports, and will result in lost revenue of around £20 million and the loss of hundreds more jobs that neither retail nor airports can afford. To quote the UK Travel Retail Forum again, it said:

“This could be the final nail in the coffin of several UK regional airports.”

At a time when the industry is on its knees, I am concerned that the UKTRF is right.

I want to see a sustainable future for our airports and aviation, but the more the Government unleash havoc for airport operators’ balance sheets, the more I am concerned for their future. It is also difficult to reconcile the Government’s position that continuing with the extra-statutory concession would be against World Trade Organisation rules with the fact that the Government’s own consultation document states that they were

“minded to extend airside tax-free sales”

at the beginning of the consultation process.

There is one way to mitigate some of the damage: the introduction of arrivals duty-free, as we see in operation around the world, including in all European economic area nations—Norway, Iceland and Switzerland—and as we know the European Union is actively considering. It is vital that we do the same. There are many reasons why this is a good idea, not least because it would support a beleaguered sector and help to safeguard jobs.

As I said, retail revenue cross-subsidises other operations and would help to fund new route development, which is critical to the future recovery of not just Glasgow but all our airports. It plays an absolutely pivotal role in supporting regional connectivity, the air travel side of which is worth £4 billion to the Scottish economy—the same as its value to London and the south-east. A report by Airlines UK found that in one year’s time, around 80% of the hundreds of routes lost to the UK aviation sector will be in the UK regional airports outside of London and the south-east. If the Government truly have a levelling-up agenda, they must do something to address that.

It is important to note that arrivals duty-free would have no impact on domestic sales of products; instead, such sales would represent the repatriation of duty-free sales that would otherwise happen outside the UK, where the passenger starts their journey. There would be no impact on tax revenue and no increase in the number of products entering the market, as travellers’ duty-free allowances would remain the same. Additionally, the introduction of arrivals duty-free stores would generate new jobs around the United Kingdom, providing further benefits to the economy through personal income and business taxation. It is not too late for the Treasury to see sense and reverse the decision, if the will is there among those on the Government Benches. The airports and retailers affected by these changes will also be willing to work together to modernise rather than ditch the retail export scheme and the extra-statutory concession.

I know that the Government would not want to be seen as the people behind the collapse of regional airports. Hitting the pause button on the plans would help to secure thousands of jobs that rely directly on these sales and thousands more at the airports across the UK that are at risk if those revenue streams are destroyed. I hope that the Minister will be able to share a positive response to the calls from me and from across the industry for a new approach to benefit the sector and the wider economy, not least because of the millions of pounds in revenue and the hundreds of jobs that the Department’s decision puts at risk at Stansted airport in her own constituency.

4 pm

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who speaks with such passion about regional airports and their importance. As Members can hear, I, too, am a user of regional airports, not least the fantastic Manchester airport, Liverpool John Lennon airport, and, I confess, Glasgow and Edinburgh airports as well. When a flight is offered with the options of those airports or Heathrow, the choice is clear for someone who is based in the north-west: off you pop to wonderful Scotland and say hi to our friends there.

I will speak to two dry-sounding but important measures in this statutory instrument. The first is extending duty-free sales to UK residents who visit the EU. For the first time in 20 years, we can have EU duty-free on our holidays. I will touch directly on the point that the hon. Gentleman has just made about supporting regional airports. In the last 20 years, who has not wandered through an airport at 3 o’clock in the morning ready to go on holiday and sighed at the duty-free, thinking that it would be a wonderful thing to clink on to the plane with, so that we were all prepared at the other end when we got to the apartment in Greece, Spain or any of the other wonderful holiday destinations that we share and visit with our friends in Europe? Great news: this is now possible. The opportunity to do a little bit of duty-free shopping will not only make a long wait for a flight at 3, 4, 5 or 6 in the morning more interesting, but it will also mean that we can directly support our local airports, which employ people and provide jobs, careers, lifestyles and communities for so many around Manchester, Liverpool and beyond. What else can I say?

What does this measure really mean? It means the return of personal allowances, which will be roughly quadrupled. In short, it means the return of the booze cruise, a long-lost institution that our proud nation has not been able to engage in. It may astonish Members to realise that when I was a child, there was much planning in our family for the biannual trip to France to get some wonderful wine, sparkling wine and beer. It was a military logistical operation, with months of planning, including considerations as deep as how many adults we could fit in the car, which of the smaller adults to fit the acquired goods around, and whether a Ford Sierra or a Ford Orion should be used to maintain the optimal packing-to-adult ratio.

It is a bit of fun, and everybody must drink responsibly, but I massively welcome this. It will give those of us in the north the opportunity to make that six-hour journey down to Dover, go over on the ferry and see some of

France, and use our personal allowances to sample something that is not available in the UK and bring it back, while having a bit of fun on a trip for the family. That is all encapsulated in quite a dry SI. I will not trouble the House longer, but the return of the booze cruise is here, and I say “Cheers!” to that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Right. I call the shadow Minister, James Murray.

4.4 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: There are countless examples of this Government leaving it until the last minute to make decisions about what arrangements would be in place following the end of the EU exit transition period. The trade deal with the EU was published only on Christmas eve and considered by Parliament on 30 December, leaving businesses frustrated and unable to prepare fully until the very last minute.

It seems even more frustrating and inexcusable for the Government to have left it so late to make arrangements for the post-transition period when the issues have been known about for years and were not the subject of any ongoing negotiations. Today’s regulations include a prime example. The Government have had more than four years since the referendum to get this right, yet they announced their decision to end VAT-free retail both at airports and within Great Britain for all international travellers less than four months before it took effect, in the middle of a pandemic and with no plans to mitigate the economic damage. That is sadly typical of the panicked, last-minute approach that this Government, and in particular this Chancellor, have taken at every turn in recent months. People working in shops, airports, manufacturing and hospitality are going to be carrying the can for the Chancellor’s irresponsible choices.

We accept that, to comply with World Trade Organisation rules, the Government needed to make changes to the regime covering VAT-free shopping; they had to amend the approach to VAT-free and duty-free shopping so that the same rules would apply to both EU and non-EU visitors. As the UK can no longer distinguish between EU and non-EU visitors to Great Britain, the Government had a choice of two options for VAT-free shopping: Ministers could amend the VAT and retail export scheme and VAT-free retail at airports by either extending them or abolishing them for all travellers—and they chose the latter.

The decision has come as a body blow to jobs across the country in sectors desperately hoping that they might be able to start recovering from the impact of covid later this year. Clearly, the frontline jobs immediately affected are those in city centre or shopping village high-value retail, where international visitors make use of the retail export scheme, and in international airports around the country, including Heathrow, where many of my constituents are employed and where travellers make use of the relief on VAT on goods purchased airside. But it is not just those jobs that are set to be hit. Knock-on effects of the changes will threaten jobs in the factories and manufacturers of the goods that tourists come to buy, and in the hospitality sector, as the UK might expect fewer tourists as a result of the withdrawal of the concession. That impact on jobs, of course, comes amid the impact of covid-19, and many are in sectors with a disproportionately high proportion of young and BAME people relative to the wider population.

Given the wide-ranging impact on jobs, it is shocking that the Government did not fully consider the jobs impact of the change before taking their decision. If they were serious about protecting jobs, they would have looked closely at the wider impact of those changes across all sectors affected and throughout every part of our country, yet there is no evidence that they did so, and many of the assumptions in the calculations that they did carry out have been questioned by people respected in the industry. In its reasoning for taking the decision, the Treasury relied on a number of calculations and assumptions about the impact of the change, more detail about which they included in a technical note issued to stakeholders. There is deep concern among stakeholders that many of the crucial figures were flawed, as the Government overestimated the cost of the option of extending the retail export scheme to EU visitors and underestimated the negative impact of ending the scheme for others.

Those affected and their representative organisations, such as Value Retail, have questioned the Treasury’s assumption that non-EU visitors spend the same amount of money as EU visitors, thereby producing flawed calculations of the cost of the alternative course of action, which was extending the retail export scheme to all. They also question the assumption that the low value of many discounts means that they are insufficient to change visitor behaviour, so removing the retail export scheme will not affect how much people spend or their decisions about spending time in the UK.

Given our concern about the impact on jobs, I wrote to the Office for Budget Responsibility ahead of the Chancellor’s spending review in November 2020, asking it to scrutinise the figures and assumptions that the Treasury was using to justify its decision to end the VAT retail export scheme and to consider its wider impact on jobs. The OBR’s reply appeared to undermine what Ministers have been saying. For example, in reply to one of my written parliamentary questions, the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, who will be responding in this debate, said that

“the OBR also looked at this package in the round when assessing the indirect impact on the economy”.

However, in its reply to me the OBR seemed to play down the extent of its analysis, confirming that it had not considered the indirect effects of ending the VAT retail export scheme on jobs. Furthermore, it said:

“our remit prevents us from considering impacts on disadvantaged groups or particular geographical areas”.

It seems clear that, despite his or his Ministers’ protestations, the Chancellor went into this decision with his eyes closed: yet again, he failed to consider the impact of his irresponsible decisions on people’s jobs.

My question to the Minister today is direct and I would welcome a direct answer. We know that the Government’s decision to end VAT-free shopping will have a significant impact on jobs. It is also clear that the Government took the decision without fully knowing what the impact on jobs would be after the new arrangements were put in place. As the measure has now come into force and analysis of it no longer has to be based on assumptions alone, I would like to ask the Minister to commit the Treasury to reviewing the impact of the changes to VAT-free shopping on jobs across different sectors and across different parts of the country, and to report back to Parliament ahead of the March Budget. If the Minister will not commit to doing so

[James Murray]

today, I would be grateful if he committed to raise it with the Chancellor and to ask him to update the House.

4.10 pm

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con) [V]: I make no apology for being delighted about the return of duty-free and the opportunities it brings to channel crossings. I welcome the jobs and investment that are maintained and boosted by the regulations. As a newly elected MP, I wrote to the Chancellor to ask for the return of duty-free and the Brexit boost it could bring to ports, ferry companies and cruise ships in areas like mine in Dover.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher), as a young woman there was perhaps nothing more exciting than putting on my dotted, spotted ra-ra dress and dancing across the sea on the ferry disco. As an introduction to exotic foreign climes, nothing could quite beat sashaying up and ordering one's frites et mayonnaise at the chip van in France and Belgium. Shopping at Costco is but nothing compared to the delights of a Calais supermarché. From fancy liqueurs to the rather disgusting but vibrantly coloured sweets, it was a proper day out. It was, I am sorry to say, very many years before I realised that the more common word for the delightfully named "smorgasbord" on the now-defunct Sally Line was nothing more and nothing less than an all-you-can-eat buffet. Never have there been such delights as those rolled herrings! And forget Leonardo DiCaprio: so many friendships and relationships were rekindled and revitalised on the famous evening "Dance to France" between Dover and Calais and back again.

Like so much of the travelling years, while we have gained we have also lost; so focused on our destination, we have lost the pleasure of the journey, for a ferry trip is nothing less than a mini cruise. From ball pits and play areas for the little ones to video games, one-armed bandits and bars for the grown-ups, there is something for everyone to enjoy. And enjoyment is what it is all about—it is fun on the ferries. The regulations we are debating today will do so much to restore those simple and accessible pleasures. They will help to reboot our beleaguered hospitality and travel industries.

Since the virus hit, all of us have learned again the closeness of our family members and the nearness of that neighbourhood walk. When the borders open and the pandemic retreats, let us not forget the wonder and beauty of all that is around us and with us. At that time, I hope that my hon. Friend will join me to see one of the true wonders and beauties of our land: the white cliffs hoving into view from the duty-free ferry.

4.13 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Before I begin to speak today, it is appropriate that I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group for textiles and fashion, and that I express my thanks to Heather Lafferty and Tamara Cincik of Fashion Roundtable, and Chantelle De Villiers from the British Retail Consortium, for their important work campaigning right across the United Kingdom on these matters.

One of the positives to come out of the pandemic has surely been the celebration of heroes in our local communities, care homes, schools and NHS. We do not often think of retailers, shop owners or small businesses across the UK as some of the heroes of the pandemic, but in reality we should. When we boil down the pandemic to its simplest principles, we see shops and local businesses doing everything they can, even to the point of closure, so that we can keep the most vulnerable in our communities safe. Many of these same businesses will be the first to face the economic and employment consequences of a 7.3% decrease in non-EU visitors to the UK, which is what is predicted by the Centre for Economics and Business Research as a result of the Government scrapping the VAT retail export scheme. So it would be remiss of me, as chair of the all-party group on textiles and fashion, not to focus my remarks today on the impact of this decision on the textile and fashion industry across Scotland and across the United Kingdom.

The Government have gone to great lengths to stress their commitment to levelling up the economy out of the pandemic and to boosting the economic performance of the cities and regions of the United Kingdom way beyond London. In their exit from the VAT retail export scheme, however, it would appear that the Government have fallen at the first hurdle. The *Evening Standard* reported before Christmas that £500 million of tax-free shopping takes place in over 12,000 stores outside London each year. Fashion Roundtable estimates that the fashion industry in Scotland is made up of nearly 2,000 businesses and employs 30,000 people. In 2019, £92 million in VAT-free fashion purchases were made in Edinburgh and a further £23 million in VAT-free fashion purchases were made in Glasgow and surrounding areas. Each of these purchases supports our high streets, businesses and jobs—high streets that need every purchase to survive at this time, businesses that are at the heart of local communities and jobs that help to provide for families and loved ones.

Hundreds of employees in my constituency are reeling already from the announcement of Boohoo's takeover of Debenhams and the lack of investment in bricks-and-mortar stores in our town centres. Every single one of them is facing untold uncertainty as to what the future holds, so Government must support the recovery of retail. It is my very present fear that thousands more will be affected across Scotland if we fail to do everything in our power to support our high streets and those who work in them.

Tourism is indeed the beating heart of our high streets and of the fashion industry as a whole. However, tourists in search of high-end purchases from UK stores will show retailers and those employed by them very little loyalty if there is ample incentive to shop elsewhere. Scottish Enterprise estimates that the tourist industry in Scotland is made up of 15,000 companies employing 218,000 people. That is 15,000 companies and 218,000 people whose businesses and jobs could be affected as a consequence of tourists choosing to shop and visit elsewhere. For my local area and region surrounding the constituency, that is close to 30,000 people. The ripple effect of this decision to leave the VAT retail export scheme should not be understated. Tourists have come to the UK in search of retail purchases and, for the duration of their stay, let us not forget, they experience, visit and, most importantly for our debate today, buy so much more. We will lose their business to other destinations that continue to offer VAT-free shopping.

There are so many whose livelihoods depend on the distinctiveness and renown that come from being branded with the label “Made in Scotland”, the inspiration, flavour, taste or beauty of which cannot be found anywhere else in the world. These are businesses and jobs that depend heavily on the tourist trade. They have had their businesses decimated by covid-19, and they are relying on a strong rebound in tourist travel out of this pandemic for their very survival. So we should and must do everything we can to encourage tourism. Too many businesses and too many jobs in fashion, retail and further afield are at risk if we fail to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am very sorry, but we do have to move on.

4.19 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): I am sure that every Member of the House would want the UK to have a fair and dynamic tax system that responds to the needs of UK citizens and reflects the economic circumstances of the time. In order to achieve that, our tax regulations must evolve and adapt, supporting society’s wider objectives and strengthening our local and national finances.

It is impossible not to recognise the enormous changes that have taken place in UK society over the past year. Even if we were to set aside the impact of the pandemic, in the hope that we will soon be able to return to what used to be normal life, the nature of the UK’s place in the world has changed—as has the way we interact with our global friends and partners. The removal of the VAT retail export scheme is a recognition of that change. We have left the EU and its customs union, and now find ourselves in a position to re-evaluate how we choose to apply taxes and duties to consumers engaging in international travel. We have the chance to treat people from different countries in the world equally, with no inherent tax status attached to being an EU visitor to the UK, compared with being a visitor from anywhere else.

A fair tax system should not allow wealthy international travellers relief from local taxes, as if they simply arrive, make purchases and leave the UK again without any other interaction with our economy. Those visitors benefit from a vibrant and thriving UK economy, our infrastructure and our connectivity, and our economy relies on everyone paying their share of tax. We do not give VAT refunds for hotel rooms, meals or theatre tickets, so why should a handbag or new coat be treated any differently? Consumer goods that are purchased in the UK should be subject to normal UK tax rules, and that should apply regardless of the country in which the purchaser happens to pay their income tax.

That is not to say that people are not welcome to come and spend their money here in the UK. We have some outstanding retail opportunities, and I hope that many people from around the world will visit this country again, once it is safe to do so. But it is not unreasonable to expect those visitors to pay a small amount in the process. It is also the case that, even for those who did use VAT RES, once the administration costs had been included, the savings accounted for less than 6% of the total trip costs on average. Given the wealth of those using the scheme, it is highly unlikely that the existing scheme affected their decision to travel to or shop in the UK. In fact, the USA, which has no

countrywide VAT RES scheme, is the top country outside Asia on China’s most-visited list, ahead of any European countries that do have tax-free shopping.

International travel and high-end retail are luxuries, and it is wrong to deprive UK taxpayers in places such as Penistone and Stocksbridge to benefit international travellers. Preventing a loss to our tax base to the tune of £1.4 billion will help us to spread the benefits of international travel across the whole UK, instead of, as at present, concentrating it in London and the south-east.

On a final note, I am pleased that this statutory instrument provides duty-free sales for UK residents visiting the EU, for the first time in 20 years. The UK travel industry has suffered enormously over the past year, and this measure will support regional airports and ports across the country. Many more UK residents travel to EU than non-EU destinations in normal times, so the changes to duty free should significantly benefit local economies as well as, of course, consumers.

The regulations implemented by this statutory instrument are fair to the UK taxpayer, fair to travellers and fair to consumers, and as fairness should be at the heart of our tax system, I am pleased to support it.

4.23 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): The first casualty of covid was aviation. That saw the collapse of Flybe, the UK Government’s supine response to fire and re-hire practices, and other significant job losses. Whilst Edinburgh airport sits in the constituency of the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), I have been supporting a number of my constituents in Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath who work at our national airport just across the Forth. They are airline pilots, cabin crew, ground staff, hospitality staff and facility staff. I have also been supporting Edinburgh airport’s chief executive, Gordon Dewar, and his team through letter writing, parliamentary questions, speaking in debates and joining the all-party parliamentary group. I have met twice with the aviation Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts): in October and again in January this year. We have spoken about the need for a comprehensive aviation recovery strategy and why that is absolutely vital to the sector and to my constituents. Those discussions included, but were not limited to, the changes being made to airside sales. In all this time, I have not had a meaningful answer to any of my questions and concerns, or indeed those of the Edinburgh airport leadership team.

Given this sorry tale, and the absence of any strategy coming forward from the UK Government, it is hard to express the alarm, dismay, disbelief and anger when it emerged during the pandemic and just before the Brexit chaos that the UK Government planned to entirely remove VAT exemption on all airside sales, save for alcohol and tobacco. In tandem with that, the decision to abolish VAT RES for high-street sales was another significant blow.

This is at a time when we should be looking to strengthen and rebuild our economy, and plan for a recovery of tourism and related sectors. This decision will have an obvious and substantial negative impact on all the above. For example, at Edinburgh airport, the loss of VAT exemption for airside sales will result in over £7.6 million in lost revenue and place hundreds of

[*Neale Hanvey*]

further jobs in peril. It will place at risk a further £3 million of revenue from retail, fashion and other specialist shops. This is job-sustaining revenue and it cannot and will not be compensated by any stretch through duty-free liquor and tobacco.

This would have a considerable financial and economic impact at the best of times, but at the time of covid it threatens the very survival of the aviation industry and will cause untold damage in the wider economy, including job losses and slower economic recovery. That will be across these islands, not just in Scotland, but aviation enables much of Scotland's economy, from tourism, business and education to culture and research. As Gordon Dewar of Edinburgh airport commented, aviation makes that possible, but we are

“not too big to fail.”

Brexit was an ill thought-out and massively damaging policy, seeing legislation such as this being implemented at the worst possible time for affected sectors. These intertwined sectors are already in survival mode. The hon. Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) may make light of the return of the booze cruise, but it is nothing to be celebrated when it is being paid for on the back of Scottish jobs and jobs across these islands, and the rather parochial view of the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) on this change and her appeal to such a narrow audience completely ignores that pernicious human impact beyond her back garden.

The creativity of contributions from the Government's virtual Benches cannot camouflage the damage this will inflict. Brexit is an unmitigated disaster and the UK Government clearly care not a jot for Scotland's wishes or our economic potential. This is but one of the compelling reasons why Scotland will very soon vote for independence and join the world.

4.27 pm

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey), and I share the northern sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher).

It is a bit cruel debate to be talking about holidays and airports and duty free while we are still unable to enjoy all those things, but as we begin to look beyond the pandemic and progressively reopen our borders to travellers, these measures will ensure fairness between travellers to EU and non-EU countries. Since 1 January, for the first time in over 20 years, duty-free goods are available to be purchased by all passengers at ports, airports and international rail stations, as well as on board ships, aircraft and trains on any international route.

It goes without saying that these changes will hugely benefit regional airports such as Leeds and Newcastle as they serve mostly EU destinations, but, unfortunately, Teesside airport will not be benefiting just yet. After years of under-investment and neglect by our local Labour councils in the Tees valley, five years ago Teesside airport was earmarked for closure; in fact, it was due to close this year. Most of our flights had stopped, leaving only a business connection to Amsterdam, and our airport became easyJet's training ground, rather than a runway for holidaymakers.

Because of Labour's complete lack of interest in this regional asset, there is not duty-free shopping at Teesside airport any more. However, we do have plans for change. The Tees Mayor, Ben Houchen, honoured his pledge to the people of Teesside and saved Teesside airport. He has since invested in turning it around—so much so that he was criticised recently by Labour's candidate for Mayor, who said that

“the Mayor spends far too much time at the airport spending huge amounts of investment there, trying to bring jobs there”, which is quite an odd line of attack.

From just one flight to Amsterdam, we are now flying back to holiday destinations such as Alicante, Bulgaria and Majorca. Soon, following the investment and improvement that Ben is putting into the airport facilities, we will see the return of duty free at Teesside airport too, so that holidaymakers in the UK can gain from this travel must. Thanks to this Government, they will see the real benefits of duty free. It is great to see that the changes that are an essential part of the post-Brexit VAT framework were put in place with minimal infrastructure changes and at minimal cost. I am also pleased to see that the UK has adopted one of the most generous alcohol allowances in the world for residents returning home. The booze allowance that Teessiders can now bring home has been quadrupled, allowing UK residents to save up to £120 of UK duty. Of course, this also applies to anyone travelling back to the UK, not just those outside the EU. That is something I will definitely enjoy, once we are able to travel again.

I understand the concerns that Members have about VAT RES, but I disagree with them. It was a hugely expensive scheme that really only benefited wealthy areas of the UK. No one shopping on the high streets in Redcar or Marske would benefit from it. Extending it to the EU instead of removing it completely would have cost us £1.4 billion every year, and that is why most visitors did not even use it. I am sure that my constituents and the constituents of many across the House would rather see that £1.4 billion spent on business rate reductions for coastal towns; on more investment in communities such as Eston, South Bank and Grangetown; and on further targeted measures to support our high streets.

Thanks to the measures we are debating today, we can make duty free great again, we can get boozing done and we can target measures on our high streets to make them more strong and stable. I fully support these measures and look forward to my constituents in Redcar and Cleveland benefiting from them at Teesside airport soon.

4.31 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: The decision to scrap tax-free shopping for overseas visitors to the UK is wrongheaded. It will cause significant damage, is completely unnecessary and should be reversed. The abolition of VAT RES has caused the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, the Scottish Retail Consortium and others to express alarm and concern. At a time when businesses are struggling to stay afloat and save jobs, and when airports face unprecedented challenges, to hit duty-free shopping is inexplicable. Duty-free shopping for visitors to the UK pays for wider operations in airports and helps sustain our city centre high streets, which are already under great pressure.

This move contradicts the findings of the Government's own consultation and is truly bewildering. As the covid pandemic leaves our airports beleaguered, tax-free sales for overseas visitors gives them millions of pounds every year in revenue, allowing re-investment in their businesses, which supports the wider economy. Tax-free retail sales can account for as much as 40% of the revenue in some regional airports, and for Glasgow airport the risk here is a loss of revenue of £8.6 million and an estimated 170 retail jobs. How will that help our airports recover from the damage inflicted on them by covid-19? We already know that due to covid-19 we are expected to lose about 600 routes from airports across the UK, but the biggest impact will be felt by regional airports.

So this move is short-sighted and bewildering, but its consequences will be far reaching. The Scottish Government were not even consulted on this decision, despite the impact it will have on the wider Scottish economy. As we have heard, this change leaves the UK as the only European country not to provide tax-free shopping schemes to encourage tourism, putting Scotland and the rest of the UK at a distinct disadvantage, as we see the EU exploring even now how duty-free shopping can be developed to aid recovery. The Association of International Retail has described this measure as “devastating”, saying that it would lead to the loss of tens of thousands of tourism and retail jobs right across the UK, while the other EU capital cities would be

“rubbing their hands with glee at this self-inflicted wound”.

The chief executive of Mulberry has also warned that this move will have

“a material impact on jobs and manufacturing”.

Despite what we have heard today, the UK Government have already admitted that this move will lead to fewer tourists visiting the UK from overseas. These visitors do not just shop: they eat out; go to museums and the theatre; stay in hotels; and travel across Scotland and the rest of the UK. The risk is not just to retail businesses, although that is significant—the risk is also to major tourist destinations through the knock-on effects on the hospitality industry, suppliers and manufacturers of goods throughout the UK. Have these businesses not suffered enough during these times without the UK Government piling on greater pressure? This measure is economically illiterate at this time, and I urge the Minister to reverse it for the sake of our jobs and the wider economy.

4.35 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome these three measures on duty-free changes and travellers' allowances.

First, on the return of duty-free, when, a few years ago, I was asked by *The Sun* newspaper to come up with some ideas for any possible benefits of Brexit, the return of duty-free was one of them, and it got widespread acclaim at the time. I mentioned the huge national groan 20 years ago when it was abolished. Tony Blair tried to stop it being scrapped but failed because of single market rules. I declare an interest as someone who has used it when I visited friends and family around the EU and would buy a bottle of duty-free whisky on the way out. It is a tax break that may not be that economically efficient on traditional measures, but is really popular and great fun. It is a tax break for the many, not the few.

The Treasury should use not a benefit-cost ratio, as it normally does, but a fun-cost ratio. It is very popular with the public. As we have heard, booze cruises will be returning when we are allowed to have them. I think that will be welcomed up and down the nation, as well as in regional airports, which will benefit massively.

Secondly, on the quadrupling of the alcohol allowance, I, for one, thought the old allowances were quite mean with just one case of wine, so I certainly welcome having two cases. I think most of the British public would also welcome that. As somebody who is favour of free trade, low tariffs and low allowances, I absolutely support a move in that direction.

Thirdly, on the retail export scheme, which is the most controversial issue and the reason the SNP is opposing these measures, I support abolishing for two reasons: first, it is not good value; and secondly, it is not fair. Basically, it is a tax break for wealthy foreigners coming to do shopping for high-value goods in the UK, but it is not good value because it is actually not that widely used. Fewer than 10% of non-EU visitors currently use it. There is a good reason for that: the fees for using it charged by the shops' administrators are so high that often 70% of the refund ends up going to them. It is not surprising, therefore, that the shops' administrators have launched a rearguard action to try to stop its abolition. Because it is used so limitedly, it reduces travel costs by only about 6%, and that is not enough to make the difference for most people as to whether they will travel or not travel to buy something. Indeed, research by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has shown that two thirds of visitors would have bought the goods anyway.

There is also—this has not been mentioned by SNP and Labour Members—the opportunity cost. The Government have to either extend the scheme to the whole EU or abolish it outright. Keeping it would cost the Government £1.4 billion. That is £1.4 billion the Government could do other things with. There are far better ways to save jobs, create jobs, help the high street and help retail than to give a tax break to wealthy tourists buying high-value goods. For example, the Government are currently looking at the reform of business rates—a key issue for high streets up and down the country—and £1.4 billion could go a very long way towards helping all shops, not just a few that specialise in this one area. Lots of different things could be done with £1.4 billion. It really is a huge sum of money, and giving tax breaks like this is not an efficient way of using it; we can do far more good with it in other ways.

Secondly, as I said, I do not support the scheme because it is not fair. It has always struck me as quite bizarre that wealthy visitors coming to Scotland to buy jewellery or coats, or coming to central London to buy computers, do not have to pay tax while British people buying the same goods do have to pay it. Why should wealthy travellers get a 20% tax break? They are using the resources and infrastructure in the UK just as much as anyone else. If I go to some other country, I certainly do not expect tax breaks on buying expensive goods there. I think it is inexplicable to most British people that the taxes they have to pay are used to subsidise such tax breaks. It is particularly ironic that the Scottish National party and Labour are opposed to this. They are meant to be the parties of tax breaks for the many, not the few; here, they have become the parties of tax

[Anthony Browne]

breaks for the few wealthy people. For all those reasons, I totally support the scrapping of the retail export scheme.

4.40 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP) [V]: Allow me to begin by saying how utterly bizarre I found some of the earlier contributions to the debate. It was as if the impact of these changes was all a bit of a jolly lark, extending no further than the ability to stagger off the return leg of a cross-channel booze cruise armed with nothing more than a blue Brexit passport and a clinking tote bag of bottles to take home. The businesses that understand the issues at stake, and those who work in them whose jobs are at risk due to this change, will, I am certain, be looking on aghast.

Tax-free shopping has played a major role in attracting visitors to our shores ahead of other potential tourist destinations. It supports a very large number of jobs in retail and in the manufacture and production of high-quality and luxury products and produce. Its removal will cost jobs and harm direct and indirect tax revenues—all benefits that will simply be exported offshore.

That affects our airports, which, despite the economic support currently on offer, remain under the cosh as a result of the pandemic. Airlines UK estimates that, without Government support, UK airports are set to lose around 600 routes as a result of the pandemic, a situation that will only be compounded by the effect of these changes on their revenues. Amid that, terminal sales and tax-free shopping, already a key component of the economic health of our airports, will take on heightened significance.

My constituency includes Aberdeen airport, which is of massive strategic importance, supporting the activities of the oil and gas sector. The airport's operators estimate that these changes will risk a loss in revenue for the airport of £1.6 million annually and put at risk some 45 retail jobs. Retail sales account for up to 40% of revenues in some regional airports—revenues that obviously support jobs but are also there to support investment in facilities and in incentivising airlines to open up connections to new destinations. Without the ability to earn those revenues, there will be fewer passengers, fewer routes, fewer jobs and fewer opportunities for wider economic development outside the perimeter fences of our airports, with growth hindered in the regions they serve and, in consequence, lower tax revenues overall for the Government.

As has been said, tax-free shopping is also hugely important as a driver for tourism. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) set out succinctly the benefits to all parts of the economy from tourism activity and the way that the spend is spread around when tourists are here. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that of the 1.2 million visitors who benefited from tax-free shopping in 2019, approximately 20,000 to 30,000 fewer will visit Great Britain every year because of this change in policy, and it is an absolute given that those who do will spend less. All told, the outcome of these changes puts at risk an estimated 40,000 jobs and over £1 billion-worth of investment.

David Lonsdale, the director of the Scottish Retail Consortium, who was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), has been clear on this. He said:

“This decision would leave the UK as the only European country not to provide a tax-free shopping scheme to encourage tourism. There is a good reason no other European nation has taken this step, and we urge swift reconsideration.”

While some of us cannot believe the UK Government's stupidity here, others cannot believe their luck, and it is little wonder that the French financial newspaper *Les Echos* has argued that the UK is in danger of shooting itself in the foot.

The UK Government need to reverse the abolition of the airside VAT exemption and allow the introduction of arrivals duty-free. That would allow the industry to restore some profitability more quickly and avoid the competitive loss to foreign airports. Most airports in other parts of the world have been doing arrivals duty-free for up to two decades. Crucially, we must retain the VAT retail export scheme.

There have been precious few Brexit benefits to date, and of those that were promised, very few have been delivered. It seems ridiculous that instead of banking some of the very few potential benefits, including duty-free, the UK Government seem hellbent on exporting them instead. It is clear that the very real concerns raised by business across a range of sectors have not been adequately addressed or heard. The Treasury must reconsider.

4.44 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]: It is an honour to speak in this debate. Although I agree that the statutory instrument does not have the snappiest title—Travellers' Allowances and Miscellaneous Provisions (EU Exit) Regulations 2020—we should not let that hide the importance of this useful piece of legislation. As a former finance director with the unenviable joy of filling out VAT retail export scheme paperwork, I can say that, had I still been sitting in my office, I would be rejoicing at this statutory instrument as it scraps the necessity, once and for all, to fill in such declaration forms.

Why is the SI of such benefit? Well, it is another benefit of leaving the European Union. Now that we have control of our laws and our regulations, we can set out our own policy and regulation around VAT and how we administer it. In my view, it is another piece of red tape and bureaucracy that we can cope without. Those red and cream VAT retail export papers—the 407 form—either have to be extended to all countries in the EU, as we fall onto World Trade Organisation rules, or we can choose to remove the scheme altogether.

Extending the scheme would cost us £1.4 billion a year and for what benefit? None, really. We can quite rightly remove the scheme altogether. There is no real advantage to subsidising customers shopping in the UK from outside the EU and reimbursing them from the VAT on the goods that they purchase. The scheme disproportionately affects central London and places such as Bicester Village, with their high concentration of non-EU customers participating in retail shopping. Let us be honest, many customers do not even use the scheme, let alone know about it, and they certainly do not visit the UK to take advantage of reclaiming VAT. As such, I entirely welcome the move and say let it be a useful boost to the Treasury.

Furthermore, for the estimated 67 million people travelling to the EU, there is the benefit that, for the first time in 20 years, we are providing duty-free sales to UK residents. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) has said, it is another benefit of Brexit. I agree with his assessment that bringing back duty free has something of the fun factor about it, and it will be enthusiastically met by the public.

Not only is this a welcome move for people travelling to the EU, but it is a huge boost for regional airports, which will now be able to offer duty free to their passengers. Like so many airports, Norwich International—it is not in my constituency, but, at a distance of 35 miles away, it is my nearest airport—has suffered so much, and I can see it welcoming this initiative entirely. This scheme is also extended to ports and international train stations.

Finally, our inbound alcohol allowances are now one of the most generous in the world, with a quadrupling of the entitlement that passengers returning from anywhere in the world can bring into the UK.

As we leave the EU, the newspapers may like to tell us of the bumps in the road that need straightening out. Well, here is a statutory instrument that adds benefit, simplification and removes bureaucracy, and I, for one, will not miss the pink and cream forms. It is a welcome move indeed.

4.48 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker). My desire to speak in this debate was driven not only by my serious concerns about the immediate impact of the measures on our airports, our retail sector and our tourist industry, but by my concern about the potential for manipulation into yet another grievance strategy by the Scottish National party and all separatists, as part of their continual campaign to undermine the United Kingdom—something that we have, sadly, seen amply demonstrated in the debate.

I ask the Government to think again, revisit this decision and re-examine the detrimental impact that it could have on our economy. Tourism and the individuals it brings here are a major contributor to the economy of the UK and each of its constituent parts, collectively and individually. Visitors who take advantage contribute around £6 billion a year to our national coffers, which are being dipped into heavily at the moment. More than that, it protects thousands of jobs in our tourist centres and elsewhere.

Attracting high-spending overseas tourists is an economic strategy that is internationally recognised and has worked for us. It has kept our cities on an equal footing with international competitors such as Paris, Milan and Madrid. By removing this incentive, we would be boosting them, to the detriment of our own cities, and detracting from the UK's international appeal. We would also be adding yet another blow to our hard-hit retail sector at a time when it is already reeling. Experts have warned that this measure would cost my city of Edinburgh an annual loss of £92 million. Those are the figures from the Centre for Economics and Business Research, which also estimates that it would cost Manchester £60 million, Liverpool £32 million and Leeds £18 million, at a time when all our cities can least afford it.

The impact will be felt initially by tourism, retail and airports, but experts have warned that it will gradually spill out and affect other sectors. Hospitality, which is already hard hit, will suffer as tourists choose other countries and other cities in which to spend their money in restaurants, cafés and bars. Manufacturing, too, will feel the pinch. Tourism industry bodies have warned that as many as 70,000 jobs are in immediate jeopardy throughout the United Kingdom, while it has been estimated that the broader damage could affect as many as 138,000 jobs, at a time when unemployment in this country is already rising at an unexpectedly rapid rate.

Our country's retail, hospitality, events and entertainment sectors, and just about every sector imaginable, are struggling to cope with the impact of a crisis that was beyond our control. The pandemic was visited on us; it was not due to any choice we made. This change would be self-inflicted damage. It would undermine vital industries and cost jobs. I appeal to the Government to think again about the danger inherent in this statutory instrument, the benefits to the country that would be lost and the damage it could do to our future.

4.52 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) gave a rather remarkable speech, first suggesting that the SNP was grievance-mongering, only then to agree with the annulment motion we have tabled. While some of us on the SNP Benches have become used to these dreary tirades against the cause of independence and that of the SNP, what we are doing today is trying to protect jobs in constituencies like hers. I also want to correct the record: I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) inadvertently misled the House when he suggested that Edinburgh airport was the national airport—he might be unaware of Glasgow airport being the best, but that is perhaps a childish point.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) for bringing this annulment motion to the House. The covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on all industries and sectors across the UK. However, the tourism and travel industry has been particularly badly hit. The albeit necessary travel restrictions have affected those working for airlines and in airports. Last week I spoke to one of my Baillieston constituents, Sharon Erentz, who works at Glasgow airport. We spoke about how the pandemic will affect air travel for many months—indeed, years—to come, with estimates that holiday makers will be cautious about booking their next holiday abroad for some time.

For many travellers, VAT-free shopping is part of the travel and airport experience. Many people who are travelling arrive at the airport early to buy holiday gifts—perfumes, alcohol and clothes—and it was clear from speaking to Sharon that many customers wait all year round to shop in the airport and take advantage of the tax relief on aspects of the retail.

Additionally, many people travelling for business regularly buy products exclusively in the airport, choosing the VAT prices over many other shops. These are often high-value customers, sometimes spending several thousand pounds at once. One of the things the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) said that struck

[David Linden]

me was that somehow this is about tax breaks. For a Government who like to talk about jobs, jobs, jobs, it rather seems that the Minister will overlook the jobs of many constituents such as Sharon, who I represent.

The proposals mean that the products sold in the airport would be the same price as on the high street. Many people have expressed worry over the fact that if there were no VAT-free shopping, many of their usual customers would not buy from the airport shops and stalls anymore. If the airport does not have competitive prices, there is indeed no incentive for holidaymakers to save up to spend that money at the airport. Airline passenger revenue is estimated to plunge by about \$314 billion in total—or 55%—from 2019 levels according to the International Air Transport Association. Job losses in the travel industry could reach more than 100 million this year according to analysis by the World Travel and Tourism Council.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North has repeatedly questioned the UK Government over the decision to scrap the VAT retail export scheme and the airside extra-statutory concession scheme. He has highlighted that, for Glasgow, the airside concession, which is now to be scrapped, is worth £8.6 million in revenue. It also means that 170 retail jobs will be put at risk at a time when between 1,500 and 2,000 of the 5,000 jobs based at Glasgow airport have either gone or are under threat. Across the UK, it is estimated that the scrapping of both schemes will cause £1.5 billion-worth of losses. When the travel and tourism industry is on its knees, it is completely irresponsible to cut one of the few remaining income streams that offers hope to so many airports.

It is vital that the UK Government are doing all they can to support the sectors most affected by the covid-19 pandemic. With the necessary restrictions, the travel and tourism industry has suffered, and with many people now facing an uncertain future and financial security, the UK Government must act. Ending VAT-free shopping adds further concern for many people, such as my constituent Sharon, who are working at airports and already facing an uncertain future ahead. I very much hope that the annulment motion is successful this evening. I will be voting for it to save those jobs that I am proud to support. Most importantly, I hope that all other Members vote to save those jobs as well.

4.57 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con) [V]: I will focus my remarks on the abolition of VAT RES—the VAT retail export scheme. It has potential implications for my constituency, which is a major international hub of shopping and tourism, and also for rest of the country, since so many manufacturing jobs in luxury goods are scattered throughout the country, including in the north-east, the south-west and Scotland.

Let me just give a few numbers. Some 16 million non-EU international visitors come to the UK in normal times, although clearly not this year. They spend more than £17 billion, of which only £2.5 billion approximately is in tax-free shopping. I am concerned that if we disincentivise these visitors from coming to the UK, we materially affect other areas of our economy, and potentially also the Treasury's tax take. For instance, these visitors

stay in hotels and use restaurants, and the Treasury could lose the VAT on that expenditure. My concern is that these shoppers, who are a very distinct group of people, are highly mobile. The risk is that if we are no longer competitive, and we are the only European country not offering tax-free shopping, they will simply go to Paris or Milan. I am also concerned about the effect that it will have on my high streets, which are clearly already suffering from coronavirus and online shopping.

This measure has already taken effect as of 1 January. I ask the Minister that we continue to review the effect of this measure and that we do a full impact assessment that not only includes the top line, but looks at all the effects on the economy—the loss of VAT, the potential loss of business rates, and the potential effect if retail or manufacturing jobs go. I hope, from the bottom of my heart, that these things do not happen, but I ask the Minister to monitor the situation, and if the data and evidence do not look good, we should be prepared to revisit the decision.

5.1 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), who has been a great champion on this issue for her local constituency for some time, and it has been a pleasure to work with her on this. I also agree with the remarks of the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine). Sadly, this is another situation where the separatists in Parliament make a point that is very important to their local area and local jobs—I agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) about that—but every single SNP speech also had to include reference to separation. This is far more important than that. It is important to jobs here in Moray, as it is in other parts of Scotland and the United Kingdom, and I think it demeans the argument being put forward by SNP Members that they had to stoop to yet more divisive topics, such as independence, in this important debate.

I come at this issue slightly differently from other hon. Members who have contributed today. I do not have an airport in my constituency. I do not have a port where ferries are coming in, but I have more Scotch whisky distilleries and visitor centres than any other constituency in Scotland. It is also home to producers such as Johnstons woollen mill, which makes outstanding, high-quality produce that is very much sought after by people affected by this statutory instrument. I met Stephen Rankin from Gordon & MacPhail and Simon Cotton from Johnstons woollen mill to hear directly what it would mean for these local businesses.

Just as an example, Gordon & MacPhail is part of the Walpole Group, and earlier today, I got some statistics from Walpole about what this would mean. It estimates that 40,000 jobs across retail, hospitality and manufacturing could be lost as a direct result of this decision. It says that the impact will not just be lost revenue and jobs, but, critically, lost investment. It goes on to say that from 15 brands that it is aware of, over £1 billion will not now be invested in the United Kingdom. That is new stores, expanding factories and distribution centres that will now be developed outside the UK because of this instrument.

Crucially, I want to look at the impact that this has here in Moray on local employers and crucial jobs. Simon Cotton made the point on behalf of Johnstons woollen mill that VAT-free shopping is responsible for

over 50% of the company's revenue in its London and Edinburgh stores. It believes that at least two thirds of that will be lost, which would make those stores no longer viable. He went on to say that, overall, VAT-free shopping accounts for over a third of its retail as well as being critical to the customers that it sells to at a wholesale level. He said—and this point really hits home to me—that, generally speaking, every job lost in retail is matched by two to three jobs lost in manufacturing. That is two to three jobs lost in the local Elgin mill here in Moray for every job lost in the company's Edinburgh or London stores. That is why I felt I had to speak up for those jobs in this debate.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington: we have to look at the impact of this decision, which took effect from 1 January. The new measures are already in place, so I hope the Treasury will take cognisance of their impact on companies such as Gordon & MacPhail, Johnstons, a number of distilleries and visitor centres here in Moray, and other high-end producers throughout the country, and of the effect on those individual companies and, therefore, on the jobs that they supply.

I represent Moray, and for me this is not a party issue; it is a local issue and I am a local representative. For the jobs at risk as a result of this SI, I shall vote to annul it because that is the right thing to do to represent my constituents and stand up for their concerns and those of employers in my area. If the vote is not successful, I hope the Government will at least look again at the impact of the decision.

5.5 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): Britain's departure from the European Union brings with it the freedom to reintroduce duty-free sales and make other tax changes that will deliver Brexit benefits to British tourists. Such gains have been enacted by the Travellers' Allowances and Miscellaneous Provisions (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which also introduced crucial changes to the VAT and excise rules for passengers following the transition period.

The new rules form a carefully considered package of measures that was introduced following a wide-ranging consultation. The changes take into consideration the Government's aim of minimising disruption at the border, along with World Trade Organisation commitments that require the Government to align the treatment of passengers travelling to and from the EU and non-EU countries.

The provisions in the SI ensure the smooth flow of passengers entering Great Britain by reducing the need for them to stop at the border to declare goods that they have purchased. My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) elaborated on how, from his personal experience, the measure removes bureaucracy. Without the instrument, EU and non-EU passengers would be treated differently, traveller flow at the border would be disrupted and the UK would breach its international obligations under World Trade Organisation law.

The measures I shall outline will have a hugely positive impact on UK travellers for a number of reasons. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) said, for the first time in more than two decades, the tens of millions of UK passengers who visit the EU every year—in non-pandemic times—will

be able to enjoy duty-free sales. For example, with UK excise duty no longer due, a 1 litre bottle of Scotch could be around £11.50 cheaper.

In addition, we have quadrupled the alcohol allowance for passengers arriving in Great Britain, making it one of the most generous in the world. Under the new rules, passengers will be allowed to bring into Great Britain three crates of beer, two cases of wine and one case of champagne for personal use without having to pay the relevant taxes. This represents an excise duty saving of up to £120. My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) praised of the significance of such measures to her constituency, which has a port for travel straight to the EU.

I recognise the concerns expressed by the hon. Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Gordon (Richard Thomson), along with others, about the ending of the VAT retail export scheme and the removal of tax-free airside sales. Although the latter policy change on tax-free airside sales is not actually part of this instrument, let me explain our thinking behind the decisions.

In simple terms, the maintenance of the VAT RES and tax-free airside sales after the end of the transition period was never an option for the Government. In reality, the choice we faced was between extending the schemes to all EU travellers or removing them both completely, because the World Trade Organisation rules specify that goods bound for different destinations must be treated the same. However, because EU visitors have never benefited from the VAT RES and still spend in UK shops without it, to extend it now would present a large dead-weight loss, and in effect the Government would be subsidising the shopping of EU visitors. I am sure hon. Members would agree that this would be an unwise use of taxpayers' hard-earned cash.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) set out clearly and concisely why this was not a fair and efficient use of taxpayers' money, and I thank him for making such a well-argued case. In addition, data and evidence submitted as part of the Government's consultation demonstrated that the VAT RES disproportionately benefited London and the south-east of England. In fact, around 90% of sales were made in London and Bicester Village in Oxfordshire. My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) made the excellent point that other regions and, in particular, smaller high streets did not appear to gain as much, if at all.

I take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan). She and I have had several discussions on this issue and I have also had extensive representations from my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). However, they will both know that the Treasury disagrees with their assessments. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that the withdrawal of the VAT RES will result in a significant direct Exchequer saving of £1.84 billion in just over five years. In addition, the OBR estimates that the withdrawal of tax-free airside sales will result in a saving of £780 million over the same period.

David Linden: With all those forecasts in place, can the Minister tell the House how many jobs—such as that of my constituent, Sharon, whom I represent—will be lost when the Government proceed with this?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Member for his representation. That information can be found in the tax impact information note.

I assure hon. Members that the Treasury will continue to keep these measures and their impacts under review. Let me turn more specifically to the prayer motion tabled against this instrument. I fully recognise the desire of hon. Members to champion Britain’s retail and tourism sectors. I share the same desire to see those important industries prosper. This package of measures will boost all airports, including those such as Edinburgh, Cardiff and Newcastle. These hubs primarily deal in travel to the EU, and so could make only limited use of airside tax-free sales anyway. They will now stand to gain significantly from duty-free sales.

As I have demonstrated, the measures contained in this legislation constitute a more equitable distribution of benefits to both consumers and airports across Great Britain. To remove this legislation would spell an end to these significant gains. Such a move could also cause disruption at the UK border by preventing the smooth flow of passengers, as those coming in from the EU and non-EU countries would be treated differently. Let me also remind hon. Members that the introduction of duty-free and the extension of personal allowances are estimated to cost the Exchequer £890 million over five years. That money needs to be found from somewhere. I am sure hon. Members will agree that it is only correct that the savings generated from the withdrawal of both the VAT RES and airside tax-free shopping should be used to support a greater number of consumers and airports across Great Britain.

The hon. Members for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) and for Ealing North (James Murray) raised the impact of these schemes on airport jobs specifically. The hon. Member for Ealing North also raised the late enactment of the legislation. I would say to him that he was not in this House when Labour Members wasted precious time during the transition period trying to frustrate and stop Brexit. Had they not done that, perhaps we would have been able to enact this sooner. I emphasise that the main impact on these businesses is the large drop in passenger numbers due to the pandemic—not to these schemes—which is why we have supported the aviation industry in the following ways. The airport and ground operation support scheme, announced on 24 November, will provide support for eligible businesses up to the equivalent of their business rate liabilities in the 2021 financial year. This is subject to certain conditions and a cap for claimants of £8 million. This is intended to help to reduce cash burn and put on lock shareholder and lender support. While this applies only to airports in England, it constitutes new spend for the Department for Transport, so Barnett consequential will apply as standard. The Government also recognise the challenges the aviation sector is facing as it recovers from the impacts of covid-19. We have supported the sector throughout the pandemic and continue to do so.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) was right to ask about the potential impacts of this measure. HMRC research shows that in 2019, fewer than one in 10 non-EU visitors to the UK used the VAT RES. That is 1.2 million out of 60 million visitors. However, the claims in the Centre for Economics and Business Research report, where her figure of 138,000 jobs comes from, are based on the implausible assumption

that the end of the scheme will cut non-EU visitor numbers by 4.96 million. That is simply not credible; it is four times as many people as currently use the scheme. Even the report’s more conservative analysis is underpinned by an assumption that non-EU visitors will reduce by 7.3% or 1.17 million, which is almost the total number of current users of the VAT RES scheme. It is unrealistic to assume that all current VAT RES users will cease to visit the UK.

I hope that I have been able to answer hon. Members’ many questions. I am delighted that we can use our new freedoms outside the EU as my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) comprehensively set out—that is, to achieve gains for local economies and passengers. As I mentioned, there is a significant cost to the Exchequer. However, this has been weighed against the revenue from the other changes that we are making. Together, these measures support our airports, benefit consumers and protect the taxpayer. For those reasons, I ask the House to reject the motion and support the Government’s approach.

5.15 pm

Gavin Newlands [V]: I thank all Members for contributing to this afternoon’s debate, but I am afraid that the Minister’s response does not really cut it. The fact is that she has ignored both the airport and retail sectors. She has seemingly also ignored the lobbying of her own colleagues on the Conservative Benches. In fact, she has forced the Scottish Conservative leader to back an SNP motion in the House of Commons this evening. I hope that she and her colleagues in the Treasury will reflect on this short-sighted decision.

I listened to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), who made several good points, but I am really none the wiser as to whether the Opposition support the Government on this matter or whether they are going to vote to revoke the regulations. Perhaps we shall see in the next couple of minutes.

In conclusion, not many Members on the Tory Benches—other than the last two speakers—seem to get it. Some of the other contributions were incredibly whimsical in nature, talking about booze cruises, ferry discos and whatever. We are talking about people’s jobs. I am not talking about rich foreigners coming over here and getting money off. I am talking about the jobs that these schemes support, right here in our constituencies in the UK. To be honest, the less said about the incredibly unnecessary snide snipe from the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), the better. That was followed by the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), although he then went to largely agree with our proposal.

It has not been enough; the Minister has not been clear that any review into this situation will come quickly enough for the sector, and it is for that reason that we will have to push this to a vote.

5.17 pm

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 74, Noes 353.

Division No. 226]

[5.17 pm

AYES

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| Bardell, Hannah | Blackman, Kirsty |
| Black, Mhairi | Bonnar, Steven |
| Blackford, rh lan | Brock, Deidre |

Brown, Alan
 Callaghan, Amy
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela
 Davey, rh Ed
 Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Flynn, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Girvan, Paul
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Hanna, Claire
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hendry, Drew
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hosie, Stewart
 Jardine, Christine

Lake, Ben
 Law, Chris
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lucas, Caroline
 MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Mc Nally, John
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McLaughlin, Anne
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Paisley, Ian
 Robinson, Gavin
 Ross, Douglas
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Smith, Alyn
 Stephens, Chris
 Stone, Jamie
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomson, Richard
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:

**David Linden and
 Owen Thompson**

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Ahmad Khan, Imran
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Amess, Sir David
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter

Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, rh Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishty, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse

Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinéage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian

Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Langan, Robert
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack

Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew

Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob

Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael

Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Maria Caulfield and
David Rutley

Question accordingly negated.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Grooming Gangs

5.27 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 300239 and 327566 relating to grooming gangs.

I would like to thank the 131,625 people who signed the first of the e-petitions that we will be debating today, calling for the release of the Home Office review into this issue, which of course has now happened. The second, smaller petition, signed by over 30,000 people, is calling for a public inquiry into the issue of grooming gangs. Clearly, this issue is of huge importance, and it has caused immense distress to a huge number of people across the country—the victims themselves who have been victims of this appalling crime, but also their friends and family, and I would add to that the whole communities that I think have been shocked and appalled by what has happened.

I think there is a sense, though, from this Home Office report that it is not quite what many people were intending. When I talk about “many people”, ahead of this debate, being a member of the Petitions Committee, although I do not represent a constituency where this has been a big issue, I found it incumbent upon myself to speak to other hon. and right hon. Members who have knowledge in this area, but also to some of the victims of this appalling crime, to gain a greater understanding of what their views are and also their views on the report. Many of them do feel that the report does not go far enough; they believe it only touches upon the issues. If it is the start of something far more significant, then okay, but if it is the end of it, they will feel very unsatisfied. I would support them in saying that I do believe further action should be taken.

One of the key problems has been the lack of data, which has made it difficult to go into detail regarding the characteristics of the grooming gangs and those involved. That has been problematic. Some hon. Members have raised the point that if the data is just not available, then surely we can just look at those who have been convicted and gain a pretty accurate picture of the kinds of individuals who have been engaged in the matter. That has been raised before.

Of course, those who are most responsible for this appalling crime are those who have been found guilty—those who have carried out the evil act. They are the principal individuals, but there is also a great sense in many of the communities and in towns such as Rotherham and Rochdale—although the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) has done brilliant work on this issue, showing great courage in standing up for and battling for her constituents—that they have been failed over a long period of time by the state, at both local level and national level. They feel like this issue was swept under the carpet because it was seen as being inconvenient and not politically correct to talk about it. That is how they feel; that is the hurt that they feel, and it is incumbent upon all of us in this House to address those concerns and give them a sense that justice has been done, and also that the lessons have been learned, so that we can try to ensure that we do not continue to have these appalling crimes happening within our society.

There is a wider point here, though, about this issue and about whether it was political correctness, for want of a better word, or something else—concern about

cultural sensitivities—but does seem in many cases that the majority of those who have engaged in this evil act came from one particular community. Many feel—and I agree with them—that if it is the case that certain crimes are disproportionately committed by members of certain communities, we should be open and honest about that and address it, because actually, by sweeping it under the carpet and not addressing it, it makes tensions and divisions worse down the line.

I would say that, as a society, we have a long way to go when it comes to tackling racism. I do not think we have completed that journey yet, but would it not be great if, as a society, we were mature enough to have these difficult discussions, while never losing sight of the fact that the vast majority in our society stand against racism, and against stigmatising particular communities? This issue does need to be addressed.

We look at the role of racism and how many of the victims of this appalling crime feel as though there is concern from certain individuals that they would be branded a racist or called out for being a racist if they spoke the truths as they know them to be on some of these matters. Actually, the view of a lot of these victims, who more often than not are white working-class girls—our girls—is that they were on occasion specifically targeted because of the fact that they were white, because of their western-ness, and because of the fact that they were not Asian. That is how they feel. I would encourage those who disagree with how they feel to have a discussion with them, because that is how they feel. Therefore, the information and data about the ethnic background of those who have been found guilty of these crimes is necessary if we are to gain a profound understanding of this appalling crime, learn the lessons, and ensure that it never happens again. If we do believe that this kind of racism towards white girls is a driver here—if we do believe that it is the case—and that it is an aggravating factor, then we need to address it, and we need a report that addresses it and gets under the skin of the issue in a way that it has not so far.

I planned not to talk at great length here today. Although I do, as a Member of this place, feel passionately about this issue, as it happens my constituency has not been impacted by it as much as many hon. Members' constituencies have, so I want to make sure that they have as much time as possible today to talk about some of the stories within their own constituencies, because I think that is very important. I would like to thank the founder of the petition, George MacDonald, and the victims I spoke to as well. I think it is right to say that the abuse of young girls conducted by grooming gangs has shaken society and we should do everything in our power to eradicate it.

I would also like to thank, on behalf of the petitioners, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for the actions she has taken. Like her predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), she has been very robust on this issue. I feel that if it had not been for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, there probably would not have been any report at all. At the end of day, any report is better than no report, in particular any report that at least promises that in future we will get the right data to be able to look at this issue and come up with solutions. As a member of the Petitions Committee, I support the petitioners in their desire for further action to be taken, so this can be looked at more thoroughly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I hope that everyone who indicated they wish to speak this afternoon will have the opportunity to do so. I am therefore introducing an immediate time limit of four minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

5.36 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Tackling violence and sexual exploitation has been one of my priorities since I was first elected in 2011, when during my roundtables with constituents I was made aware of child sexual exploitation concerns following the Rochdale grooming gangs scandal. It is not an easy subject to discuss—I find it incredibly difficult to even think about someone who is knowingly abusing a child for their own pleasure—but we know it happens in every community and in every part of the country. We all have an obligation to do what we can to prevent it and root it out wherever we find it.

I have a clear protocol to immediately escalate any child sexual exploitation case that is brought to me to the appropriate authorities. Unfortunately, my team and I have dealt with a number of cases. Greater Manchester police provide me with regular briefings on activities undertaken by Operation Messenger and now Project Phoenix, which specifically deal with CSE across Greater Manchester. I meet regularly with local groups such as Keep Our Girls Safe and the Women's CHAI project, which stands for Care Help And Inspire but has a wider remit than supporting girls and women experiencing abuse, as does Inspire Women. Pre-pandemic, when I was visiting at least one school a week, I used this as a platform to promote equality, self-awareness and resilience of all children, whatever their background, sex, ethnicity or religion. I also meet regularly with Oldham's Interfaith Forum. Together, we have worked to promote human rights for all, including the rights of our children.

In Parliament, I am a member of the CSE cross-party group chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), whom I congratulate on all she has done to expose CSE. We have heard evidence from those who have been abused, and reviewed evidence of good practice among other things. However, as the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) has just mentioned, I am keenly aware that our understanding of the scale and extent of CSE, and in particular CSE associated with grooming gangs, is lacking. As the House of Commons Library report identified, it only becomes known once cases are identified and victims and offenders are reported.

It is estimated that three out of every four victims of a rape or assault of a person under 16 do not come forward and report it to the police. In a recent Home Office report, about 10,500 cases were flagged by the police as potentially CSE-related. The victims of CSE were said to be mainly young women, predominantly 14 to 15 years old, who had a number of risk factors that made them vulnerable to exploitation. Group-based CSE offenders were said to tend to be male and under 30, younger than those offenders acting alone who were said to be more prolific.

Clearly the data is inadequate and the focus of the Home Office on this important issue needs to sharpen up. Every child matters and their rights, as enshrined in the UN convention to which the UK became a signatory

in 1990, need to be actively embodied. I will not let those far-right groups, wherever they may skulk, get away with lying and trying to sow hate, division and blame on this issue. I repeat that child abuse occurs in every community, in every part of the country and in every part of the world, and I am committed to rooting it out, wherever it may be.

5.39 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), with whom I serve as co-chair of the all-party group on women in the penal system. It is striking that we are in this debate, because so many women who end up in the criminal justice system are themselves victims of abuse. It is a reminder of how often the state fails these women.

We are talking about victims of serious crime. It disappoints me that although we have been aware of this issue for some time—we have had some high-profile cases that have taken years to bring to justice—we are forced to have this debate by the Petitions Committee, and it is at the fag end of a parliamentary day. Again, girls are at the back of the queue, and victims of sexual crimes are not getting the attention they deserve. We really need to turbo-charge everything that we are doing in this space, so that women and girls will recognise that the state takes sexual abuse seriously. That will make them more prepared to come forward. We know that some of the perpetrators have been getting away with this for years and are still at large, because—we have seen it too often—when people bring it to the attention of the authorities, they look the other way because it is all too difficult.

If we in this place are not seen to be taking these crimes seriously, we cannot expect the rest of society to do so. I am very grateful for the opportunity to debate the subject, but I am very sorry that it has come to this and that we are doing it in these circumstances. I hope that when we can get this place back to normal and we have more parliamentary time, we can give such issues the attention that they deserve.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who has been champion by name and nature in the way she has taken on this subject. I commend her determination. There are men in every community who view women and girls as objects of sexual gratification. That is something that we should always root out, but we especially need not to let cultural sensitivities get in the way. We have talked about white working-class girls today, but just imagine what happens to girls in communities where we do not tackle it. Take things like forced marriage: we know that children are brought over from other countries to marry their relatives, with horrendous consequences, not just because they are forced into relationships without their consent, but because the children who are the output of such marriages often have huge problems.

For the welfare of everybody involved, we really must be honest about tackling these issues. If we do not, other people will, with a much more sinister motive. We need to be working with these communities, changing attitudes and tackling patriarchal influences that make our women and girls victims of organised criminal activity. We will do that only by engaging with communities, and we certainly will not do it by pretending that such things do not happen.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Minister takes the matter very seriously, and I am sure she would prefer the debate to be longer. I say to her sincerely that I look forward very much to working with her to give the subject the attention it deserves. I end with a plea: now that we finally have relationships and sex education as part of the curriculum, can we look properly at the tools for educating girls that consent is theirs to give, and it is not to be expected?

5.43 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) [V]: I really appreciate the fact that we are having this debate, because I have spent eight years trying to get justice for survivors of child sexual exploitation and to prevent grooming gangs. I have been vilified, smeared and threatened, by the far right and the far left, who use this crime for their own political agenda. The only impact it has had on me is that I get a taste of the intimidation that survivors have to endure. So their threats just make me more determined to make sure we permanently get rid of any form of child sexual exploitation. But their actions embolden the abusers. They make it more difficult for those in child protection to do their jobs, and they deter victims from coming forward.

I fail to understand why this topic is so emotive, when there is a clear picture of gangs with a similar profile being involved in sexual abuse and exploitation. This should be investigated without fear or favour, as any other gang-related crime would be. We live in a democracy, and the law should be able to be applied in an even-handed way.

We are very fortunate in Rotherham, because the National Crime Agency's Operation Stovewood is looking at cases of CSE by grooming gangs between 1997 and 2013, a 16-year period. It has already identified 1,569 survivors and 261 designated suspects. To date we have had 20 convictions in court, and four awaiting trial. That is in 16 years. I know survivors who are 70 years old. Think about the scale and length of time of this abuse.

Now some specific suggestions to prevent CSE by grooming gangs and to secure convictions. Each potential victim should have a named person they are comfortable with, and that person should be shared across all stakeholders. The treatment of witnesses and survivors must be constantly reviewed to make sure they are able to give evidence in a safe format and receive the support they deserve.

Mandatory relationship education for all primary schoolchildren should have been in place in September 2020, but we have still not been given an implementation date. The law desperately needs updating on positions of trust and online harms. There should be stricter sentencing. The use of pre-charge bail, particularly where there is a flight risk, must be swiftly cut back.

Serious consideration needs to be given to offender release. Sexual predators do not change their patterns of behaviour, and they return to the same communities where they carried out the abuse. Prevention must be our focus, which means health professionals should be trained to spot and support potential perpetrators.

Trading standards officers should be able to investigate premises where they believe grooming gangs operate. A multi-agency approach is key, but it has to be full and equal across all partners and that should include Government

Departments. I am glad the Government are looking to make funding for support services more stable. To succeed, it has to be long-term funding.

Unregulated care homes must be banned for all children under the age of 18. We need to promote closer interaction between the police and the Crown Prosecution Service. We need to use disruption tactics as much as possible which avoid victims having to give evidence. Our adversarial court proceedings further brutalise victims and survivors, and this is unacceptable. We have to change it.

We need to establish a national set of triggers that allow local authorities to provide support for children showing signs of harm, rather than the current postcode lottery. We need to make sure that every toolkit dealing with CSE understands that children have a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, as currently there is an assumption that victims of CSE are non-disabled white girls, and that is not true. We need to require every local authority to take urgent steps to improve the accessibility of CSE services.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady is well past her four-minute time limit, I am afraid. I will give her a final sentence.

Sarah Champion: Fundamentally, the Government need to work in a cross-departmental way to end this crime once and for all.

5.48 pm

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): It is a pleasure and an honour to follow the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). She has given so much by giving a voice to the voiceless in this Chamber. I pay tribute to her work over eight years. I also pay tribute to her and to my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) for the work they have done to help form the Government's strategy on CSE through the external reference group. I would like to sound a note of caution. This is an excellent first step in getting some measure of justice for the survivors of CSE, but it is not an endpoint in and of itself. We have a lot more work to do.

The other day I had the opportunity to speak to Maggie Oliver and other Greater Manchester police officers as part of the all-party parliamentary group for whistleblowing, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson). Maggie Oliver rightly pointed out, when I talked about historical child abuse, that these crimes are actually still ongoing and are very often unseen, and that is why this new strategy is so important.

Rightly, the first objective of the strategy is to tackle the abuse and bring offenders to justice. I cannot stress enough how important that is. Justice has to be seen to be done. The people who commit these wicked acts and rob young people of their childhoods should be removed from decent society—including those who would seek to abuse the courts and try to frustrate deportation orders and other sanctions used to protect the victims.

As well as robust intelligence sharing and wider improvements to the criminal justice system such as an additional 20,000 police officers, 10,000 prison places and an extra £85 million for the Crown Prosecution Service, we need to send a clear signal that the law is

[Chris Clarkson]

there to protect the innocent and punish the guilty. I welcome the national vulnerability action plan and place-based strategies that respond to threats within communities, such as child sexual exploitation, by making use of a range of data and local stakeholders. Powerlessness has been the sad thread running through all our work on this. Any measure that gives a voice to those communities and individuals dealing with this on a day-to-day basis has to be welcome.

I also put on the record my support for the Home Office's commitment to educate children and young people about healthy relationships in the digital world, through the roll-out of the relationship, sex and health education and media literacy strategy, along with targeted support that protects children and young people from offenders seeking to exploit their vulnerabilities.

When I think of the victims in my own constituency whose story was so powerfully portrayed in the drama "Three Girls" and the documentary "The Betrayed Girls", it is not hard to see how the system that should have shielded them from harm let them down so very badly. It took the courage of a few individuals to stand up for those whose voices the system chose not to hear. But not every victim has a Sara Rowbotham or a Maggie Oliver willing to put their own livelihood and reputation on the line just to see justice done. We must make sure that the system itself is reformed.

In the Westminster Hall debate on Operation Augusta part 1, we heard the ways in which power was shirked and responsibility ignored while those in power worked to protect themselves in the face of unspeakable abuse. Although part 2 of Operation Augusta, focusing on Rochdale, has not yet been released, I fear that we already have a strong sense of what it will tell us.

That one child has been abused physically, emotionally or sexually should be a cause for sorrow and anger in equal measure; that these awful crimes should have been permitted on a near-industrial scale, aided and abetted by the practised disinterest of the authorities, should cause horror and serious reflection. I thank those who have dedicated so much of themselves and their time to tackling this hateful behaviour and I stand with them, fully committed to doing whatever it takes to give justice to those so very badly let down.

5.52 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson), who gave an incredibly thoughtful speech.

Last year, local authorities recorded nearly 19,000 victims of child exploitation; if we consider the number over the last few decades, the total number of survivors will be staggering. One of the petitions that we are discussing today specifically calls for an inquiry into child sexual exploitation. It is clear that a cross-Government approach is needed to deal with this issue, deliver justice and support survivors. I would like to focus my remarks today on survivors.

Sammy Woodhouse is a survivor of child sexual exploitation. She has bravely spoken publicly about her experiences, and I met her yesterday to discuss Sammy's law. Sammy's law is a simple ask of the Government not

to criminalise child victims of exploitation. When Sammy was 15, the police raided the property of her abuser, who is now a convicted serial rapist. Sammy was half-naked and hiding under his bed. He was not detained, but Sammy was arrested and charged. She is a survivor of exploitation, but is now forced to disclose her criminal convictions.

Survivors such as Sammy are forced to commit crimes by their adult abusers and are often convicted of their crimes. Those criminal convictions stay with them for life. They are forced to disclose them to their employers and on insurance applications, and they are even prevented from attending their parent-teacher associations. That cannot be right and it must be stopped. Child exploitation is an abuse of power used to coerce and deceive. Survivors should not be punished for crimes they committed because of their exploitation.

I am today asking the Government to introduce Sammy's law, so that victims of child sexual exploitation can have their criminal records automatically reviewed and the crimes associated with their grooming removed. The High Court has already ruled that it is unfair to force survivors to disclose criminal records linked to their grooming, arguing that the link between past offence and present risk is non-existent or extremely tenuous.

This change in the law should be basic common sense. It would end the unfair victim blaming and re-traumatisation of victims and survivors. I urge the Government to act today.

5.55 pm

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con) [V]: I appreciate the opportunity to speak in this important debate. In my constituency, this is very much a live issue, and it is causing considerable concern. There are ongoing investigations in my constituency on these issues and a pending trial. I will be very careful with my remarks, so as to protect that crucial work. If we ever hope to see justice, and for communities such as ours to be able to heal, that process must be able to play out in full.

I do not think it is unreasonable to ask the question of how widespread grooming activity is and how and where it links to child sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse cases. I also do not think it is unreasonable when people express a lack of faith in the system, as they have to me in conversations and surgery appointments. There are clear examples of where the system has not worked and victims have been let down time and again. There is a clear appetite for more information and for faith to be restored in the process. I firmly believe that the only way we will get there is through transparency—through making the failings of the past visible and demonstrably learning our lessons from them.

I want to concentrate the remainder of my remarks on a different aspect of this debate: those with vested interests stirring up tensions to suit their own ends. This is not to deny in any way the powerful and awful cases of CSE and CSA that exist and that must be stamped out whenever they occur. In Barrow, we have seen the sharp end of these vested interests. They take the vacuum of information that forms when investigations start or court processes begin, and they exploit people's fears. They exploit their worst natures, and they fill the void with misinformation and conjecture that serves no one but themselves.

At the height of the first lockdown, in the middle of the pandemic in Barrow, we had the indignity of the far right turning up, stoking up tensions in our town and leading physical protests and convoys of vehicles down the A590, all the while proclaiming that they were doing it in the pursuit of justice. But of course, they were not. Instead of shining a light on injustice, they shone a light very brightly on themselves. They talked up the causes and the division that they promoted, and then they left, leaving people who are sat at home by necessity, spending too much time on Facebook, with questions. Those with books to sell and media reputations to burnish should be ashamed of themselves for exploiting the fears of communities such as mine, who have legitimate worries and concerns.

I hate to say it, but I have no doubt that there is sexual exploitation going on in some of the towns and communities that make up constituencies such as mine. It is a sad fact of modern life. While every single case is reprehensible and requires a proportionate response from the justice system, individual cases do not mean an epidemic or a cover-up, no matter what some of those I mentioned suggest. We have a burning need to restore faith in the processes that surround these investigations and to shine a light on them. The more transparent we can be, the easier that job will be, even if the conversation we must have to get there will be very difficult indeed.

I would like to end by thanking a few of my constituents. During a pandemic, in a lockdown, faced with some shocking headlines that are amplified by social media, the community has pulled together and looked after those most in need. I would especially like to thank Women's Community Matters in Barrow for all it has done for those who need help most in our community—victims and survivors alike. We have a long way to go to win the public's trust, and I very much hope that the new tackling child sexual abuse strategy gives us demonstrable results soon, so that that journey can begin.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It will be obvious to those in the Chamber that it is nearly 6 o'clock, and clapping will be taking place throughout the country and in other parts of this building. Obviously, we will not have any clapping in the Chamber. Indeed, we have already paid tribute at noon today with our one minute's silence to Captain Sir Tom Moore, who has been such a great inspiration to the country over the last year, and in memory of the many thousands of people who have died. As it reaches 6 o'clock, we will just pause for a moment. We do not need to clap, but we do show our appreciation.

Thank you. I call Tracy Brabin.

6 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spennings) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. That was a very warm and sensitive pause. Thank you for your wisdom. Obviously, this is a sombre debate. I thank all Members who have spoken so well. I look forward to hearing further contributions. I associate myself with Sammy's Law, which is a brilliant step forward and has support across the House.

The fact that we all want to debate this topic—it is particularly poignant that the debate falls within Sexual Abuse and Sexual Violence Awareness Week—hopefully

means that the petitions that brought it to the Chamber are not necessary. The campaign's hashtag, #ItsNotOk, feels like something of an understatement, as the crimes that we are discussing are among the most heinous imaginable, with so many communities blighted by grooming gangs. The exposing of historical cases will continue to rise as victims find the incredible courage necessary to come forward.

The communities I represent in Batley and Spennings have been rocked by announcements and police investigations into grooming gangs far too often. In January 2019, 55 men from the Kirklees local authority area and adjoining areas in West Yorkshire were arrested. A few months later, in June, a further 44 men were arrested. In December last year, 32 men were charged, and they will be in court in October 2022. There are those who believe that court cases should come sooner than 22 months after the arrests were made. I have sympathy with that point of view. However, when it comes, it is important that justice is served, in recognition of the unquantifiable bravery of the victims who have come forward. Kirklees Council has already apologised to victims for its failings in relation to the Huddersfield grooming gang—a case that has been through the courts, with long sentences now being served. That court case and subsequent reports will have been sobering reading for many authorities. It is important that we learn lessons.

We have heard of other cases in other areas from MPs today. I hope that survivors of those crimes, who may not yet have come forward, will hear the message from this Parliament: "We do believe you. You will be listened to, and everything will be done to bring your attackers to justice." The unavoidable truth is that these long and complex investigations place a significant financial burden on police forces, which are struggling financially. I worked with West Yorkshire police force in making a successful appeal for £1.4 million from the Home Office to investigate historical CSE. I am really glad that that bid was successful, but I was concerned then, and I remain concerned, about what would have happened to that case, and cases like it, if funding had not arrived. Surely the Home Office should put in place a system that does not involve forces going to Ministers, cap in hand.

What brought us to the Chamber today are two public petitions, one requesting a full public inquiry, the other requesting the research for the public inquiry promised by the Home Secretary's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid). In place of that inquiry came a review in the name of the Home Secretary, which I doubt will placate those calling for an inquiry. On the release of that report, the headlines yet again focused on the ethnicity of the abusers, stating that the majority of abusers are white men rather than the promoted myth that this is only British Asian men. Of course demographics and ethnicity are important, but not to the children who find themselves locked into a life of cruel abuse. Children are vulnerable because they are children, and predators will exploit that. We need a system that raises alerts when children are vulnerable, before they fall into crime.

Today's debate is humbling, and our thoughts are with the young girls, predominantly from troubled or unstable backgrounds, who are failed. However, we will listen to you, and we believe you.

6.4 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Any debate on grooming gangs must start and end with those who have survived them. They, and their bravery in coming forward, are the reason we even know about this systematic abuse. They are the reason we have secured convictions. They have survived horrors beyond imagination—a drawn-out routine of vicious, violent abuse, sometimes lasting years.

We know from the Home Office report that survivors are most commonly females aged 14 to 17. The main risk factors are being in care, experiencing episodes of going missing, and having a learning disability; others include drug or alcohol dependency, mental health issues, and experience of previous abuse. In other words, the very people that our society should most protect are the ones who are being most let down. To say that we have let them down is an understatement. Like many of us here, I am a parent; I have two young children and lovely nieces and nephews. I could not bear it if one day they too were to become victims. We must prevent these horrors from occurring to any more children.

I welcome the report, albeit dragged out of a hesitant Government, but following its publication the Home Secretary said in a written statement that

“motivations differ between offenders, but...a sexual interest in children is not always the predominant motive. Financial gain and a desire for sexual gratification are common motives, and misogyny and disregard for women and girls may further enable the abuse.

Offenders can come from a range of social backgrounds—some have been stable middle-class professionals, some of whom were married, whilst others have had more chaotic lifestyles.”

The one thing that would hamper efforts to tackle group-based child sexual exploitation is to falsely claim that the criminals belong to only one religion, one ethnicity or one race. We know that is fake news, and official, independent statistics attest to that fact. Those falsehoods are exploited by the far right to create racist divisions in our society, perpetuating myths and stereotypes. People such as the English Defence League and Britain First use the images of survivors against their wishes, organising marches and stirring up hate online.

This is not about conforming to political correctness. If we adopt the language or assumptions of hate groups, we fall into a dangerous trap. The devastating reality is that sexual abuse can happen in any community, be it white British, Sikh, Hindu, Muslim or of any other background. Our priority should be ensuring that victim support and services are accessible and available, not spreading misinformed and prejudiced beliefs.

I know from local communities in Slough that child sexual exploitation, in addition to racist scapegoating, is a real concern, which is why I have raised it with our Slough police commander and the council leader and chief executive to ensure that we are working collaboratively and minimising the risk of this abhorrent crime affecting our community. If we are misdirected and end up looking in the wrong places, we fail to tackle this head-on. The current level of prosecutions is just not good enough, and funding for support organisations is nowhere near enough.

Let us be clear: this is about patriarchy and power. It is about people discounted, dismissed and dehumanised not only by those who rape them but by the authorities

they turn to for help. We all have a moral duty to end this abuse and make sure that the evil perpetrators feel the full force of the law.

6.8 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con) [V]: It is difficult to encapsulate in four minutes something that I have spent many years, as a former children’s Minister, campaigning against. Back in November 2011, we launched the Government’s child sexual exploitation action plan in collaboration with *The Times*, which had long campaigned on this subject, Barnardo’s and the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, which published its report, “Out of Mind, Out of Sight”.

We worked with police, children’s social care, children’s charities and, importantly, with children and young people—the victims—and parents themselves. That followed the high-profile series of prosecutions and convictions after Derbyshire police’s Operation Retriever, which brought this subject to the newspaper headlines for the first time. It was almost a year before the dramatic Savile revelations, which opened the floodgates for people to be aware of the presence, extent and historical reach of CSE.

The action plan highlighted the fact that CSE can happen anywhere to anyone. It is not exclusive to northern metropolitan boroughs, or to people from estates on the other side of town, or to troubled girls, as some hon. Members have mentioned. I met survivors of CSE from the families of doctors and lawyers and from middle-class backgrounds and heard their deeply harrowing accounts. I mentioned the CEOP’s report “Out of Mind, Out of Sight”, because this and all these reports had uncovered a systemic and systematic culture of neglect, secrecy and, in too many cases, wilful complacency to call out the issue of teenage white girls, in some cases boys, being sexually abused by British Pakistani grooming gangs. It was a taboo subject. It was swept under the carpet. Disgracefully, the victims were often regarded as having asked for it. The insidious tentacles of political correctness often suffocated action, so we set out an action plan. Above all, we called for urgent action based on complete transparency, encouraging survivors to come forward and speak out and to put the whole shameful problem firmly on the nation’s radar.

The following September, the Savile revelations broke. Every day, the media was full of accounts of CSE across celebrities, religious institutions, schools and so on. Virtually nowhere was immune. There was a fear that the original phenomenon of organised CSE of primarily teenage white girls at the hands of these predominantly British Pakistani grooming gangs would be sidelined by the prominence being given to others, despite a catalogue of such cases from Rotherham, Rochdale, Telford, Oxford and well beyond.

It is a real disappointment that, today, we are having to debate an issue based on the lack of transparency about the extent of the systemic activities of these grooming gangs, which are still going on. I appreciate that most of those convicted for CSE are middle-aged white men, many acting alone, but the phenomenon of organised British Pakistani grooming gangs is a specific and dangerous criminal activity, and it needs to be called out for what it is and tackled in a very specific way. So why on earth are we having to debate now why maximum transparency has not been applied to research

into how these gangs operate and how they are still getting away with it, because this is not an historic matter but still a contemporary problem?

The problem of secrecy and the culture of denial within certain police forces was again brought to the fore last year, with the new inquiry announced by the Mayor of Greater Manchester into the abandonment of Operation Augusta. If we are really to get to grips with the issue of grooming gangs, surely we need to delineate it as a specific sexual offence distinct from other forms of sexual offence. For that, we need to be open and transparent with all the research already undertaken and to undertake more if it is needed. We have had the Jay report, the Louise Casey report, and the former Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), commissioned his own report, which seems to have been downgraded and has now morphed into an external reference group consisting of several hon. Members. When the former Home Secretary launched the original inquiry, he intended it as a comprehensive and definitive report on child grooming, published in full, so why has this research and report become a no-go area? We owe it to the victims and the survivors to publish in full.

6.12 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): In beginning my remarks, I pay tribute to the bravery of those survivors who have come forward in their pursuit of justice. Although sexual assault convictions are alarmingly low across the piece, there is a specifically insidious aspect to the group-based child sexual exploitation phenomenon, both in terms of the institutional failings of survivors and in societal prejudices about what a perfect victim looks like. This can mean that survivors are treated as perpetrators of crime, rather than victims of it when they come forward, particularly where their grooming has involved being sexually abused for money or where they may have been involved in the recruitment of other survivors as part of their abuse.

Research shows that perpetrators often gravitate towards children who are perceived to be vulnerable in situations where safeguards around them may be lower. To that end, the tackling child sexual abuse strategy highlights the importance of giving children the best start in life—early-years wellbeing and mental-health provision. It is disappointing that 10 years of Tory austerity has meant cutbacks in all these areas. We need strong leadership and accountability, and a cross-department and multi-agency approach. All Government Departments—the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—have opportunities and responsibilities to stop these appalling crimes, and all Departments must work collectively to that end.

I am particularly concerned about the increased risk of online harms related to child sexual exploitation during lockdowns, with children spending more time online, away from school, and with far-right myths about the ethnicities of offenders in group-based child sexual exploitation being exploited online to fuel divisions between different communities. These are some of the most heinous crimes imaginable, and we should do all we can to ensure not only that the recommendations of the “Group Based Child Sexual Exploitation Characteristics

of Offending” report and associated work are implemented, but that we tackle the stigma that stops survivors from coming forward.

6.14 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): This is not by any means a subject that I, or I suspect any of us, find easy to discuss, but the difficult conversations are always the most important to have, and it is our duty, for our constituents, to have them.

It is now more than 20 years since one of my predecessors as MP for Keighley, Ann Cryer, first raised her concerns about grooming gangs and child sexual exploitation within the Pakistani community in West Yorkshire. Ann did a good job; she brought the issue to the forefront of the conversation and did the right thing in raising it. I have been a Member of this House for only just over a year, and I have been taken aback by the amount of correspondence that I have received on this issue. I am afraid to say that more than 20 years have gone by and nothing has really changed. Luckily, I am able to represent one of the best communities we have in this country.

I am incredibly conscious of just how delicate this subject is, but it should not be. My view is that unless we talk about it openly we are failing, so let us call this problem out for what it is: predominantly a small minority of largely Muslim men in West Yorkshire—including, I am sad to say, in Keighley—have been sexually exploiting young children for far too long. The Muslim community are quite rightly outraged at the entire community being branded with the same accusation. It is not fair and it is deeply offensive.

The consequences of not taking action are extremely serious. If we tiptoe around the edges or fail to talk openly about these challenges, we are failing both the victims and the Pakistani community. These victims, mainly young girls, are having their lives ruined at a young age by this vile and disgusting sexual abuse. In 2016, a group of 12 men who committed serious sexual offences against two girls in Keighley and Bradford were jailed for a collective 130 years. One of those girls was raped by five men in succession. Live cases involving grooming gangs are still working their way through the courts. Only last October, 21 men from Keighley and Bradford were arrested for being linked to offences that allegedly occurred against a young female between 2001 and 2009. I know the police are working on many other cases.

If we fail to address all these interlinked social and societal issues, we run the real risk of failing our communities and making them suffer even more, and unfortunately the worst of humanity will exploit it for their own game. This has already happened. In the 2005 general election, on the back of these very issues, the British National party made my constituency of Keighley their No. 1 target seat. It was a campaign that damaged race relations and caused huge upset and hurt. The people of Keighley, quite rightly, rejected the BNP’s nonsense, but if we do not tackle this issue with urgency, we run the risk that others will try to take advantage of it.

These are difficult issues to tackle, but all of us in this House have a responsibility to take action, because if we do not, we will have failed, and the consequences for our communities will be far too great. I say to everyone across Keighley that I will represent them as best I can.

6.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke on this topic in the House in October 2019, when I highlighted the report by Barnardo's, which I want to speak about again. Its survey showed that one third of children who are sexually exploited are looked after. The 498 children helped in one day by the charity's specialist sexual exploitation service also revealed marked geographical variations, while 29% of them were looked after, 16% had a disability, and 5% had a statement of special educational needs.

The report is shocking and hard to read and follow. It referred to some 10,500 crimes that were flagged by police as child sexual exploitation-related, with victims mostly commonly being female and aged 14 to 17. The main risk factors were being in care, going missing, having a learning disability, drug and alcohol dependency, mental health issues and experience of previous abuse. The report also suggested that group-based CSE offenders appeared to be predominantly but not exclusively male and generally older than those operating in gangs.

My desire is to work with the Government on this issue and to support them in what they bring forward—it is important that I put that on record—as we see how we can ensure that the statistics are not repeated two years down the line. The stats are very worrying and quite distressing. That work starts not just with the funding designated for non-governmental organisations such as Barnardo's, which do tremendous work in this realm, but adequate funding for police forces. That will enable police forces to work hand in hand with schools, building up relationships and becoming familiar faces. It will mean not having one social worker with upwards of 50 families to deal with. Social workers are under pressure—indeed, the system is under pressure. The difference is that we are talking about little lives and their futures.

The stats for 2001-02 on the mental health of looked-after young people in Great Britain aged five to 17 were really worrying. Some 45% of looked-after children aged five to 17 had a mental health disorder, as defined by the statistical classification of diseases, compared with 10% of the general population. I want to support the Government as they seek to do better. I just need to know what the plan is, how it is to be funded and when the change will begin—for every child in care, it cannot be soon enough.

I put on record my thanks to every foster parent and every adoptive parent who seeks to sow love in the lives of looked-after children. I also thank every church volunteer, youth-club worker, teacher and classroom assistant—every person who works with young people to instil in them the fact that they are loved, important and of value. We need to do better with our children, to protect them, to protect their self-worth and to ensure that every child knows they have someone to go to for help if they have concerns. A key issue is where they can go to, who looks out for them and who ensures that they are protected. I want to encourage us all—let us do more and sow more into children's lives. That truly will be the measure of the success of our nation and the way we take things forward.

6.21 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con) [V]: I am grateful to the Petitions Committee for securing time in the Chamber to discuss the distressing

but sadly prevalent issue of child sexual exploitation. I am grateful for the work that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, along with her ministerial team, has been doing in this policy area. I pay particular tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) for her outstanding and unwavering work to secure justice for all victims of abuse.

I understand that law enforcement capacity and capability is being strengthened and investment made to increase our ability to stop child sexual abuse. I am grateful that the Government have published a national strategy to protect children from all forms of child sexual abuse and published a paper on the characteristics of group-based child sexual exploitation.

Child exploitation is complex and convoluted. I am concerned that there is currently no provision in legislation to recognise the power imbalance between a child and an adult who targets a child for abuse and exploitation, up until the point that a child is either a victim of sexual abuse or involved in a crime. The lack of recognition of coercive and controlling behaviour in relation to a child prevents successful prosecutions for sexual offences, as well as for modern slavery offences. Although the abuse happens on a persistent and continual basis, prosecutions often focus on separate counts of offences, requiring a child to remember the details of them all rather than the abuse as a whole. In sexual abuse cases, teenagers aged 16 and 17 need to prove that sexual activity was not consensual.

The definition of child sexual exploitation is aligned with the earlier definition of child prostitution in the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and does not reflect the fact that children may be exploited due to the imbalance of power between a child and an adult. Available tools such as sexual risk orders, and modern slavery and trafficking risk orders require criminal-level evidence of proof. They also involve lengthy processes before they are even put in place, which can result in a child remaining in an exploitative situation or the situation escalating to abuse before action can even be taken. Children aged 16 and 17 are not being covered by the provisions of child abduction warning notices or for the purposes of online grooming offences. In the light of these concerns, The Children's Society is proposing the introduction of a new offence of coercive and controlling behaviours in relation to a child for exploitation purposes. I hope Ministers will consider The Children's Society's recommendations.

The sexual exploitation of a child is abhorrent and a serious crime. Working together, we can strengthen the law to hold perpetrators to account and provide their victims with the justice they deserve.

6.25 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): It is impossible to discuss these so-called "grooming gangs" without talking about the most infamous epicentre of abuse; we all recall the widespread atrocities that occurred in the Rotherham region, of which my Rother Valley constituency is a part. What happened there is a mark of shame that we as a nation shall all bear until every perpetrator and enabler faces justice. But let us not just call them grooming gangs; let us call them out for what they are. They are paedophiles, rapists, abusers, deviants, perverts and, above

all, monsters. Over two decades, in Rotherham alone, 1,500 children, some as young as 11, were raped. Let that sink in: 1,500 children in one town were raped.

However, it did not have to be that way. What makes this pattern of abuse all the more outrageous is the silent complicity of the local authorities who are supposed to protect us and our children. Time and again, the issue was raised, at all levels. Victims and concerned parties reached out to the council, the police and all relevant bodies. Repeatedly, these victims were not only ignored, but vilified. Unbelievably, in some cases they were even given over to their attackers, and they were arrested for actions they had not freely committed. The signs were there for all to see, yet they were ignored for decades.

So why was there a cover-up—for it was a cover-up? The Jay report stated that the agencies turned a blind eye to the localised grooming of young white girls by hundreds and hundreds of men of Pakistani heritage. A five-year investigation by the Independent Office for Police Conduct found that the Rotherham police ignored the sexual abuse of children for decades for fear of increasing “racial tensions”. Whistleblowers were given the cold shoulder and council employees lived in fear of being called racist for intervening. That raises the question: if the police and local authorities will not stand up for right and wrong, what chance does anyone have—what chance do our children have? Ethnicity concerns should not have made a jot of difference; a monster is a monster, regardless of their background or ethnicity. However, it was that excuse that allowed so many to get away with so much for so long. The authorities’ aversion to offending sensitivities enabled so much suffering. Let me repeat: the aversion to offending sensitivities allowed thousands of girls to be raped.

Nevertheless, we must try to move forward, for the sake of the victims, their families and the people of Rotherham at large. We all need justice and accountability. Operation Stovewood is making great strides and is currently looking at 1,200 recorded crimes, with 261 designated suspects.

We must ensure that we look after the victims. For instance, Sammy Woodhouse, a brave survivor and one of my constituents, has proposed Sammy’s law, which would pardon child sexual abuse victims for crimes they were coerced into committing and would remove the crimes committed by the children from their criminal record. We must support that; this Government must put that proposed law into action. That is just one way in which we must try to right the wrongs of the past, but we must leave no stone unturned when it comes to the victims. We must also look at those who enabled these things and allowed the perpetrators to get away with it—those who covered it up and ignored it for so long. There is no individual crime more horrific than paedophilia and there is no punishment too severe for the perpetrators of these heinous acts. We must never again allow such things to happen to our children, and we must never again allow those who committed and enabled such monstrous acts to hold any authority in our society.

6.29 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Facts are often inconvenient. They are sometimes disturbing and occasionally alarming. The facts are that in Oxford, 373 children, including 50 boys, may have

been targeted over a 16-year period, according to a serious case review. In Rotherham, as we have heard, 1,500 children—most of them white girls between the age of 11 and 15—were sexually abused, predominantly by British Pakistani men. In Rochdale, nine men who abused girls as young as 13 were convicted over a child sex grooming ring, and we know again that the Pakistani community was disproportionately represented among those convicted.

Those are the facts, but the fiction—well illustrated by the Home Office report published last December, which is a study in obfuscation, by the way—is that we cannot draw conclusions about whether certain ethnicities are over-represented in this type of offending. We must not allow concerns about causing offence to leave children vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Of course it is true that all kinds of people do all kinds of wicked things—people from all parts of this country and of all ethnicities—but there is a proven relationship with certain subcultures and a subset of a particular community being engaged in this activity. The former Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) recognised that, as does the current Home Secretary. The reports and studies into these events recognise all that, so let us deal with facts rather than fiction.

Mindful of that, I must also note that the Jay report and other inquiries show a proven link to taxis. Taxis were used to cruise and pick up young girls from care homes and even schools. As the Minister of State for Transport, I commissioned a report into taxi licensing with a view to putting safety at the top of the agenda. That report, which was conducted by Professor Mohammed Abdel-Haq on my behalf, looked at how taxis could be made safer, partly on the back of the events in Rochdale and Rotherham and elsewhere. It is imperative that the Government now look again at that report and put into law those recommendations, which will guarantee that these things do not happen again. My dear friend—though he is not an hon. Friend in the technical sense—the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) brought forward a private Member’s Bill which would have gone some way to putting those recommendations in place, and I ask the Government to please look at that Bill again.

The Home Office needs to rethink this matter, and I think the Home Secretary knows it. We owe it not only as a matter of respect to previous victims, but as a matter of care to those who might be victims in the future. We owe it to the vast majority of our British Asian community who share our horror at what has occurred. Most of all, we owe it to ourselves as legislators, for if we care enough, and I believe that Ministers and Members of this House do, we must do enough to protect the vulnerable.

6.33 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) [V]: I thank the petitioners, and I thank the Petitions Committee for bringing this debate to the Chamber, as well as Members for making some very thoughtful and powerful contributions, many of which are based on years of experience in championing the rights of victims.

As the Home Office research we are debating states:

“Group-based CSE has been the subject of major investigations, attracting significant public concern and highlighting shocking state failures that have caused untold hurt to victims, their families and communities.”

[Stuart C. McDonald]

That horrendous untold harm caused by these hideous crimes has been spread right across the towns and cities of the United Kingdom.

In relation to the specific petitions before us today, I will make three short points. First, research designed to provide a greater understanding of different types of offending behaviour is far from unusual. It can help inform policing and the wider Government response. The better we understand crime and criminals, the better, it is hoped, we can prevent these shocking crimes from happening in the first place, and that includes looking at what backgrounds offenders come from. All sorts of lessons can be learned not just for policing and criminal justice policy, but for wider social policy. However, as colleagues have rightly warned, great care must be taken in interpreting results and to prevent their being used by people who are determined to sow division, rather than to help victims.

We must also be careful that such research does not lead to counterproductive stereotypes. As the paper points out in relation to victims:

“Although awareness of vulnerability can be helpful, it can also contribute to stereotypes about what a victim of child sexual exploitation looks like, with the consequence that victims who differ from that picture are overlooked or unwilling to come forward in the belief that they will not be believed.”

In the same way, we should not fall into the trap of creating stereotypes of grooming gangs in case we fail to apprehend the ones that do not conform to it, or make it more difficult for their victims to feel confident about coming forward.

Secondly, on what the publication actually tells us, the review concludes that offenders are overwhelmingly male. There are some patterns for age and some limited patterns for social background. However, despite high-profile cases involving British Pakistani gangs, the fact is that there is no robust evidence on ethnicity:

“Based on the existing evidence...it seems most likely that the ethnicity of group-based CSE offenders is in line with CSA more generally and with the general population, with the majority of offenders being White.”

That is an important point, but as the report goes on to say

“this does not mean that cultural characteristics of offender groups are irrelevant or should be ignored by local agencies.”

Far from it: an approach to deterring, disrupting and preventing offending that recognises, acknowledges and takes account of the communities in which offending occurs is absolutely essential. We need such an approach, for example, to ensure all victims feel able to come forward and speak about what is happening to them, to identify suspicious patterns of behaviour or follow lines of inquiry, and to ask the questions that have to be asked and ask them of the right people. Too often in the past that just has not happened.

Thirdly, I hope the published report has been useful and has informed the new strategy. I do gently query with the Minister what exactly the Home Secretary seeks to achieve by apparently seeking yet more research on whether any particular group is over or under-represented among offenders, and how a more accurate picture can really be expected to emerge given the huge problems about reporting and classification. How will that change anything in Government strategy? Surely the most

important point is that we have enough information to take action already, and the focus now must be on scrutiny of the new strategy—a welcome strategy—and of the co-ordinated and properly funded action that must follow in order to deliver justice.

6.37 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I thank the Petitions Committee for bringing us here today. I, like others, think that this should have more prominence than waiting for the public to raise it; it should be front and centre in our thinking.

I remember the words of the girl who sat in front of me 10 years ago as she described, as if it were completely normal, a line-up of men at a party waiting for her to perform oral sex on them. She said it to me as if it was an everyday thing—no biggie. A year later, I was called to a school where a group of boys had sexually abused, assaulted and exploited over 50 girls at their school. I spent hours and hours interviewing young people and children about their experiences of sexual exploitation and abuse, and I realised how normalised, even in my own childhood, had become the idea that men can pass around girls and women among friends and associates in order to broker power, money and status.

In the last 15 years, thanks to the bravery of victims of sexual exploitation and grooming gangs, and also to the bravery of whistleblowers from police forces, sexual health services, youth workers and brilliant campaigners such as my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), we better understand this heinous crime. Less than a decade ago, terms such as child prostitute were bandied around and children were still considered troublemakers rather than victims. The last decade has taught us many things. This crime should never have been ignored, and these children were failed by pretty much everyone. Anyone who seeks to use this horror as a political tool, rather than having a laser-like focus on saving the victims and bringing to justice the perpetrators, should be ashamed. As the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) said really eloquently, this issue is not a tool to be further exploited.

The Government have now published the long-awaited review that the petition called for. I am only sorry that the delay meant that further distrust and misdirection on this issue was allowed to gain traction. Transparency, openness and robust external and internal critique of state agencies is the only way that we are going to combat this crime and win back trust.

Let me turn to the Government’s newly released strategy on combating child sexual abuse. The strategy is good in the most part. As other Members have said today, it is a first step in the right direction. I am sure that the Minister will expect nothing less from me than a promise that at every single stage that this strategy is rolled out, I will be there asking exactly how the Government are going to do all the things they say they are going to do. I will keep on at her Department every week and check on progress.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham is usually right about these things and she was right today that unregulated care homes have to be sorted, and that pre-charge bail should be—without question in this area, and in many others when it comes to vulnerable people—sorted immediately. The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) also made

very good recommendations, and I could not agree more with the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) with regard to taxi licensing and the effort that needs to be put in there. The Government should do all these things; not one of them is in the strategy currently.

The strategy talks about working together, and we have heard a lot about cross-Government Departments needing to work together. I have spent the last decade, at least, sitting through review after review on this topic, meeting after meeting, homicide review and serious case review after another. In every meeting, I heard the language of “agencies do not work together well enough” and “information sharing is a problem”. In 10 years’ time, I will hear the exact same thing. Saying this and writing it into a strategy will change nothing. We have to make sure now—today—that this is not about what review we want to do; it is about what we want to change and how it can be different this time.

I turn to the proposals for schools in the strategy. There are very few people in this House who would not support the sentiment of a strategy that says, “We will educate children and young people about healthy relationships in a digital world”—noble indeed.

Yet only this week we have seen the publication of school materials being used in some schools in the UK that are teaching, and I quote:

“within a romantic relationship between male and female, masculinity is more about initiating”,

whereas,

“femininity is more about receiving and responding”.

The Government continually shrug their shoulders about these incidents, but they need to understand that without proper funding, robust safeguards and proper scrutiny, there is a potential that the roll-out of healthy relationships education could be anything but. Telling girls to expect men to initiate sex, and for them to receive it and respond to it, is dangerous. What will the Government do to monitor what is being taught? Saying that prevention will happen in our schools will take much more work than just words written on paper.

If I were to reflect on the whistleblowers in famous cases, including Sara Rowbotham and others from Rochdale mentioned by Members today, I would find that it was youth workers and sexual health workers who tried to speak up for the hundreds of girls that they were seeing being abused and exploited, yet over the past 10 years we have seen huge reductions in the numbers of youth workers and detached sexual health practitioners. Years of cutting back these services as if they were a luxury means that in any strategy the Government write now, they have to build from no base. A decade after these scandals, we should not still be in pilot phase after pilot phase.

The Government’s own strategy outlines that in the year ending March 2020, there were 58,000 police-recorded incidents of contact child sexual abuse—abuse where contact was made, not on the internet. In the year ending December 2019, only around 3,700 defendants were charged and 2,700 were convicted. That suggests that there are tens of thousands of incidents of contact child abuse reported with no further action. The number of convictions has been reducing since 2016. This situation is getting worse; we are convicting fewer people. The Government have been in power for a decade and they

have been talking tough on this issue for pretty much all that time, yet numbers show appalling charges and conviction rates, which are getting worse.

I want to close my remarks by paying tribute to the victims of this crime and saying some of the things that they have asked me to say today. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), I spoke to Sammy Woodhouse just earlier this morning; I speak to her regularly. Sammy, as many have mentioned, was horrendously abused from the age of 14 and had a son born of repeated rape by Arshid Hussain. Sammy wanted me to specifically raise the issue that it is still very much the law in this land that her rapist should be allowed, and in fact in her case was encouraged, to seek access to her son through the family courts—a man who abused her as a child given credence as a father.

Sammy’s case, as the Minister knows, is by no means an exception. We can all stand here and be fire and brimstone about the rapists and child abusers—monsters, as the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) said—who perpetrate these crimes; however, here in this building we have repeatedly failed to legislate to prevent these rapists and other perpetrators of child abuse and domestic and sexual violence from continuing the abuse of their victims into adulthood through the family courts. This is on us; it is our failings—it is the law that has been too meek to change and to stop rapists like Sammy’s rapist being able to access her child.

Sammy and other victims have also asked me to raise specifically in this place the fact that we must have better service provision and protection for children born of rape. Currently, the system sees them merely as silent bystanders. Victims have asked that I bring to the Minister’s attention Sammy’s law, which has been mentioned many times, and I fully back the many calls today to implement that immediately.

The crime of child sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse happens across every part of the country; sadly, it happens in every community. The modus operandi of the perpetrators is the same; it is as if there were a manual online about how to target vulnerable people, exploit their weaknesses and then groom them to think it is their fault.

The nation has been shocked and appalled by these crimes for a decade. The victims of high-profile cases have been used as political footballs for the same length of time, when all they ever wanted was for this to never happen again, for victims like them to be heard, and for the crime to be understood. The time for action has long passed; let us do everything we can together, with every lever we can pull, to change this story once and for all.

6.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins) [V]: I would like to start by thanking the members of the public who signed these petitions raising this very important issue and thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) and other hon. Members across the House for being their voices in this debate and representing them powerfully and thoughtfully.

This Government have made it our mission to protect the most vulnerable in our society, including by tackling child sexual abuse. In our work we have listened to

[Victoria Atkins]

victims and survivors about their horrifying experiences—how they were let down by the state and betrayed by those whose job it was to protect them. These injustices were set out eloquently by hon. Members including my hon. Friends the Members for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson) and for Keighley (Robbie Moore), the hon. Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and others. This should never have happened and must not happen again.

Political or cultural sensitivities must not deter national and local agencies from investigating and preventing these devastating crimes. Victims of sexual violence deserve justice regardless of the background, the status, the race or any other characteristic of the perpetrator. Abuse is abuse, and everyone is equal under the law.

That is why in May last year the Home Secretary committed to publishing a paper looking at the characteristics of group-based child sexual exploitation, which was published in December. I want to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich, however, that this paper is by no means the end of our work on this issue; more must be done by Government, law enforcement and partners to better safeguard children and tackle perpetrators of this form of abuse and the many other forms of child sexual abuse that exist both offline and online. That is why we published the tackling child sexual abuse strategy last month to work on all forms of CSA. The strategy sets out how we will work across Government—a point made powerfully by the hon. Member for Rotherham—as well as with law enforcement, safeguarding partners and industry to root out offending, to protect victims and to help them rebuild their lives. It builds on the action plan described by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). The paper on group-based sexual exploitation plays an important role in the strategy and its implementation now and in the future.

I will go into a little detail about how the paper was developed, its findings and how we plan to build on this work in the future. The paper was informed by an analysis of published academic research, official statistics and work published by organisations that work with child sexual exploitation victims and survivors. In addition, police officers and safeguarding officers across the country with experience in investigating this type of offending were interviewed. The paper reflects the insights drawn from across all this work.

This is a complex and deeply sensitive issue. To ensure that the paper was robust and scrutinised, we convened an external reference group consisting of independent experts on child sexual exploitation, who reviewed and informed this work throughout. The group included survivors, leading academics and highly experienced professionals from the criminal justice system and the children's sector, as well as the hon. Member for Rotherham, who has done so much in this area, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan), who is similarly determined to shine a light on this offending. The insight and expertise that the group provided was invaluable, and I thank them all for their diligence and contributions.

Taking all this work together, we saw, for example, that offender networks are often loosely interconnected and based around existing social connections. This means that they are often broadly homogeneous in ethnic background, socioeconomic status and age. Contact with potential victims may take place in locations often visited by offenders and where safeguards around victims are lower. Hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), have raised the frequency with which taxis and takeaway restaurants have featured in the highest-profile cases. Studies indicate that motivations differ between offenders, but that a sexual interest in children is not always the predominant motive. Financial gain and a desire for sexual gratification are common motives, and offenders commonly demonstrate attitudes of misogyny and disdain for women and girls, as raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock and the shadow Minister.

Ethnicity has been raised by several Members. The paper refers to a number of studies that have indicated an over-representation of Asian and black offenders in committing this type of offending. It is difficult to draw conclusions about the ethnicity of offenders as existing research is limited and data collection is poor. This is disappointing, and it is something that we are determined to address through the national strategy, because accurate data is clearly vital in developing the right response in local areas.

We have therefore made a number of commitments in the tackling child sexual abuse strategy. The Home Office will work with criminal justice partners, charities, frontline professionals and others on improving the range and quality of data collected, including on the ethnicity of offenders. We will then use this data to help protect children by preventing and detecting offending. Hon. Members have asked whether we can count the defendants who have already been convicted. Officials have looked at this, but because there is no specific category of group-based sexual abuse, such offences cannot be isolated. But, as I say, we want to correct that in the future.

We are investing in the police-led tackling organised exploitation project, which is piloting new ways of investigating organised forms of exploitation through the innovative use of data. We will publish a new and enhanced child exploitation disruption toolkit that promotes the use of the full range of powers available to agencies, such as civil orders, licensing powers and safeguarding interventions, so that they can stop offending with every tool at their disposal.

I listened with great interest to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), who supports the work of the Children's Society. Although I cannot answer all her requests tonight, we will continue to invest in the Children's Society's prevention programme, which works with local agencies to prevent exploitation and abuse. Recent examples of the programme's work include working with the police in Yorkshire to deliver training to taxi drivers, and working with delivery drivers and couriers to support them in identifying CSA in the context of the pandemic. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) knows, the Ministry of Justice is looking into the issues in the family courts that have arisen out of the expert panel on harm's review—in particular, contact with parents.

The second petition calls for an independent inquiry. I will touch on that briefly, because I want to give time for my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich to respond to the debate. The Government share the public's concerns about failures and the need to ensure that they are not repeated in the future. In 2015, the Government established the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. The inquiry concluded its public hearings in December, after taking evidence from more than 600 witnesses over four years. It held 323 days of public hearings across 15 investigations and has published 14 reports so far, with more than 50 recommendations to better protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation. We expect to receive the final report of the inquiry in 2022.

The inquiry is independent of Government and decides for itself what to investigate and how. It has investigated the nature and extent of, and institutional responses to, the sexual exploitation of children by organised networks, and the public hearing into that strand concluded in October last year. Evidence was heard from a range of witnesses, including victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation, as well as representatives of police forces, local authorities, Government Departments and charities. The inquiry will publish a report of the investigation in autumn this year, setting out its conclusions, and we welcome this scrutiny.

Finally, I would like to thank again the signatories of both petitions, as well as the victims and survivors around the country who find somehow the wherewithal to work with us and the police to help prevent these terrible crimes and support other victims. As has been so well articulated in the debate, these crimes affect not only the immediate victims of the abuse but entire communities. My hon. Friends the Members for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) and for Keighley set out some of the impacts in their constituencies and the damage that can be done to trust in the processes, systems and authorities that are there to protect people.

We are determined to ensure that Government, law enforcement and other partners better understand that any community and cultural factors relevant to tackling offending must not and cannot get in the way. As the Home Secretary said:

“What happened to these children remains one of the biggest stains on our country's conscience.”

That is why we must do everything in our power to safeguard children from abuse, deliver justice for victims

and survivors and restore the public's confidence in the criminal justice system's ability to confront these devastating crimes.

6.58 pm

Tom Hunt: I would like to thank all the contributors to this very powerful debate. I think there was quite a lot of cross-party agreement on many of the core issues. I am grateful for the Minister's commitment that this is not the end of the process and that these difficult questions will continue to be asked. My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) was on the review group, and I know that he had significant concerns that, even now, there is significant pushback from certain elements of the establishment to the steps that the Government need to take to get to the root of this, to understand it properly and to make sure that we nip this in the bud and do not continue to have a situation where primarily our girls of this country are suffering this appalling abuse.

As I said at the start, my heart goes out to the victims of this abuse, all their friends and family and the communities. We must not allow political correctness and a concern about sensitivities to get in the way of addressing these issues, because it does not solve the problem. It can often make it worse, and this is much too important an issue to get wrong. I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 300239 and 327566 relating to grooming gangs.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CONSTITUTIONAL LAW)

That the draft Government of Wales Act 2006 (Amendment) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 14 December, be approved.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

Question agreed to.

Bereavement

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

7 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I would like to point out that a number of hon. and right hon. Members wished to speak or intervene in this debate, but due to the constraints of virtual participation that has not been possible. However, I did say I would mention my good and hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), who sadly lost his grown-up daughter last year when she passed away. I offer my condolences and respects to him, and indeed to everyone who is suffering such grievous loss and seeking to cope with it.

I thank the charities Setld, Cruse Bereavement Care and Sue Ryder, which helped me to prepare for this debate. They are leaders in their field, supporting people to cope with bereavement and the loss of a family member or friend. As you reminded us, Madam Deputy Speaker, at 6 o'clock the whole nation mourned the passing of Captain Sir Tom Moore, but more than 100,000 deaths have occurred because of the pandemic, leaving thousands to cope with the challenges of bereavement. These issues have never been more pressing.

I want the Minister to respond to three specific points. The first relates to the bereavement standard, the second to digital death certificates, and the third to statutory bereavement leave. These are the three issues that the charities supporting grieving families have identified as the most important, but currently we lack cross-governmental co-ordination and focus on them. Issues to do with bereavement run across several Government Departments, including the Departments of Health and Social Care, for Work and Pensions and for Education, the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for giving way; I spoke to him beforehand about making an intervention. This is an issue that grieves us greatly. Does he not agree that in these dreadful days, when people cannot attend wakes or go through the normal stages of grief, there is more need than ever for support and care for those who grieve in these awful dark days, for those who are losing their loved ones from covid, from cancer and through accidents, and for those who cannot bear it any more? There really is a need to do better.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful for that intervention, and I absolutely agree. There are some specific things that we in this House can do and that the Government can do in relation to the bereavement standard.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD) *rose*—

Grahame Morris: I will give way to the hon. Lady, who also indicated earlier that she would like to intervene.

Wendy Chamberlain: I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. Does he agree that although work is being done in the private sector around the bereavement standard and we have the Government's Tell Us Once service, we are still getting too many clumsy mistakes when we are dealing with grief? I had a constituent who received a letter from the Department

for Work and Pensions addressed to his wife to tell her that she was no longer eligible for employment and support allowance because she had died. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to do more?

Grahame Morris: I completely agree with that, and I want to develop those arguments.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) *rose*—

Grahame Morris: I am willing to take one more intervention, but I want the Minister to have time to respond. I give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Sir John Hayes: I wanted the hon. Gentleman to get all his interventions in at once, so his flow can continue. He will know that I am chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for funerals and bereavement. I wonder if he could add to his list of demands for the Minister the provision of vaccinations and personal protective equipment for frontline funeral staff, and a clearer line about the policing of funerals. There are some suggestions that funeral directors are being held liable for enforcing sensible rules on funerals. We need greater clarity on that, too, and I am very grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to make those points.

Grahame Morris: As always, the right hon. Gentleman makes eminently sensible points born out of his experience with the all-party group. The three suggestions or demands that I have put forward are those that are identified by the three charities I mentioned earlier, but certainly personally I do agree with him on vaccination, funeral arrangements and so on.

I would like to ask the Minister to look at the issue of cross-governmental co-ordination and improved focus on these issues. I understand that the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) is often identified as the Minister for bereavement. I am delighted that we have the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) as the Minister today, but we certainly need a clear ministerial lead on bereavement to ensure there is proper co-ordination on the issues raised by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and others. Otherwise, bereaved families will continue to slip through the net and be passed from pillar to post, which is distressing and frustrating.

A bereavement standard would benefit business and the bereaved by providing a clear, concise and consistent process to close accounts when a loved one dies. A bereavement standard would establish, first, an agreed timeframe for companies to respond to bereavement enquiries and settle outstanding customer balances. Members will be aware that the existing arrangements, the Tell Us Once service to which the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) referred, applies only to the public sector, and not to private companies, utilities and banks. Secondly, a bereavement standard would establish a dedicated bereavement customer care direct email channel for each company to handle such cases and avoid customers waiting on calls. Thirdly, it would establish the standardisation of paperwork needed to close an account, with a view to accepting—this is a really important point in the age we live in—digital documents wherever possible.

I anticipate that the Minister will, in his reply, refer to the excellent bereavement standard that already exists in the public sector. The Tell Us Once service is working well, ensuring that bereaved people do not have to go through the trauma of telling every single Government Department that they have lost a loved one, but we need exactly the same in the private sector to cover banks, utilities, insurance companies and more: a standard process across all organisations and companies, with specifically trained staff dealing with bereavement and an agreed timescale to close accounts and resolve issues. There is nothing more distressing than when such inquiries drag on for months and months.

At one of the most challenging times in life, I hope we all agree—this is a cross-party issue; I am not seeking to make a party political point here—that families should not have to spend hours going back and forth with companies, waiting months to close an account. Research from Settl'd and Cruse Bereavement Care shows that the vast majority of bereaved people described the administration processes as time-consuming and stressful. A quarter found it traumatic, especially having to phone so many individual companies and repeat time and again, “My husband/wife/father/mother has died.”

The single most important action the Government can take to support families would be to introduce a digital death certificate. This would enable families to close accounts quickly, initiate probate and engage specialist services such as Settl'd to deal with the administration following a death. When asked to introduce digital death certificates, in a written response, a Home Office Minister responded:

“There is currently no provision in law to issue a death certificate other than in a paper format.”

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate him on his powerful speech. Will he join me in calling on the Government to issue clear guidance for families who have lost a loved one who suffered from industrial diseases, such as the many miners that he and I represent, to ensure that those families receive the compensation that they are entitled to?

Grahame Morris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I am tempted to go off at a tangent, because it is an issue that I feel terribly passionate about, particularly given the age of many miners and their widows, who have to deal with the complications with utility companies and so on, which will not accept digital death certificates. There are complexities when the cause of death is an industrial disease such as pneumoconiosis and the complications of it. It is a very important point, and the Government could do something about it by issuing guidance to assist those families.

There is currently no provision to issue a digital death certificate. As I said, when asked, the Minister said it was not possible to issue a certificate except in a paper format. However, time and again, when concerns have been voiced about digital exclusion, we have been told that there is a policy of “digital by default”—indeed, the Government have estimated that by moving services to digital channels, they could achieve savings of up to £1.8 billion a year. Digital by default should not only deliver savings to the Government, but should help better serve the people we represent.

The Minister is, I hope, aware of the widespread support for the bereavement standard. A YouGov poll showed that 80% of the British public agree with all three of the proposed bereavement standard elements. Indeed, an early-day motion tabled by yours truly, No. 818, “Supporting grieving families through a bereavement standard”, has been signed by 53 Members of Parliament from eight political parties, including, I think, the hon. Members present today, and almost 92,000 have signed the petition by Settl'd, Cruse Bereavement Care and Sue Ryder. So, potentially, through the Petitions Committee we might have an opportunity for a longer debate if the Minister cannot be persuaded of the arguments tonight.

Fundamentally, this is a debate about care and compassion. Bereavement is a life experience that, sadly, will affect each and every one of us at some time. Coping with the loss of a loved one requires time and space to grieve. Some companies, to be fair, show immense care and compassion to employees at such times, but not all companies do.

Bereavement and death are the ultimate equalisers; both will come to us all. The pandemic, the scale of the loss, a nation in mourning should focus all of our minds and give us the strength to act. We have an opportunity to create a caring and compassionate system—one that can assist bereaved families at the most difficult time that they will experience in life. So, Minister, I ask for a positive response and a promise of progress on the three issues raised today—the bereavement standard, digital death certificates and statutory bereavement leave.

7.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing tonight's debate and on the interesting way in which he framed the three asks. I echo his condolences to the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) following the loss of his daughter. That must be so painful.

The debate is on a pertinent issue, so I was so grateful to the hon. Member for Easington for bringing it to Parliament and continuing his work in this area. We have heard of the painful impact of bereavement on individuals and families, and we have seen it over the past year in particular. I sympathise with anyone who has lost a loved one. It is deeply painful to lose a person who has played a special role in our lives. It is a sad truth that we will all experience loss or bereavement in our lives, so the hon. Gentleman speaks of many of our personal experiences. That inevitability does not make those feelings easier to manage, and many of us will feel overwhelmed with the sense of loss, but it highlights the importance of ensuring that consumers dealing with bereavement face the minimal amount of difficulty as they carry out their necessary business. It is intuitive that we want to improve the bereavement process, to make dealing with the accounts of the deceased more efficient and streamlined. After all, that time can be better spent on handling our emotions and continuing with our day-to-day lives. I am grateful for the many companies that already excel in supporting consumers in vulnerable positions, particularly those experienced with bereavement. But the hon. Gentleman spoke from the heart, and I am grateful to him for continuing to raise awareness of the issues facing consumers.

[Paul Scully]

We are all aware of the far-reaching impact that covid-19 has had on our lives and the suffering that it can bring—whether the personal loss of loved ones or simply hearing about the virus’s mortality rates in the media. The Chamber may recall that, like many in the House, I am all too familiar, unfortunately, with the heavy toll that coronavirus has taken: sadly, my mother died just before the first lockdown and two uncles have died. I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) talking about industrial diseases; my father died of mesothelioma after having inhaled asbestos when he was doing his apprenticeship on the docks. That was in Yangon and Glasgow, so it was even more complicated and difficult to work through that process. It is important that in such complicated situations, we see what more we can do to help.

People around the country are supporting one another during this trying period—friends, families, charities and businesses. We must reach out and take the opportunity to thank them. It is also a trying time for many in business, yet many continue to excel in meeting the complex needs of consumers. Many firms across the sectors offer emotional training to staff, dedicated channels for the bereaved and clear access to information. I am grateful to those businesses for supporting their consumers during an already stressful time.

But bereavement is not one moment in our lives; it is a deeply personal experience. We can live with bereavement all our lives and feel various degrees of emotion at any given moment. It is important that we acknowledge that when we respond to the issues facing those who experience bereavement. Closing accounts and settling estates is a small snapshot of that experience. The Government continue to support those dealing with loss across the piece.

Due to the excess numbers of deaths, especially now that we have reached the tragic point of 100,000 covid-19 deaths, and the increasingly complex grief for many people due to the disruptions to normal grieving processes, we expect a significant increase in demand for bereavement support during the medium to long term. We are taking a cross-Government approach to supporting bereavement services as the pandemic highlights the essential work that these organisations provide and the significant strain that they are under.

When a bereavement is particularly debilitating or likely to have a longer-term impact on an individual’s mental or physical health, they have access to our excellent national health service. In May 2020, the Government announced £4.2 million of additional funding to mental health charities and charities providing bereavement support. That was part of a £750 million package of support for the voluntary sector, announced by the Chancellor in April 2020. As part of our support for those experiencing bereavement, the Government continue their commitment to improve outcomes for consumers in vulnerable positions.

Bereavement is the prime example of how we can all be vulnerable at some point in our lives. The Government frequently work with regulators to ensure co-ordinating support for those in vulnerable positions—whether the consumer is struggling to pay their bills, suffering from a medical condition or struggling to engage with the market

in some way. Those regulated sectors rightly recognise bereavement as a vulnerability and regulated firms are expected to treat consumers fairly, with dignity and respect. Many of them do meet very high standards in this regard. Research shows that consumers often receive excellent, compassionate service from their providers when dealing with end-of-life administration. Numerous provisions are made by the regulators to embed that good practice across the essential service sectors.

In energy, Ofgem is committed to protecting consumers in vulnerable circumstances and has a comprehensive consumer protection framework in place. It works with a flexible definition of vulnerability, enabling a spectrum of consumers to seek the necessary support from their provider. Ofgem has explicitly mentioned bereavement as a personal circumstance that can make someone vulnerable. Firms are therefore expected to treat consumers experiencing bereavement fairly and compassionately, as many do. That is a trend across the sectors. Water companies are expected to better identify and support customers in circumstances that make those customers vulnerable, including bereavement. Telecoms companies are expected to be dynamic in their approach to vulnerability and to treat consumers fairly and appropriately, responding sensitively to changes in circumstances such as bereavement.

Grahame Morris: The standard is enormously variable. I am losing what little hair I have left in a row with a telecoms company. It is so difficult even to speak to a human being, at times. Would it not be advantageous for the companies concerned to have a simpler system that works for consumers? Some 80% have indicated in a survey that they do not think the current arrangements are satisfactory. Will the Minister consider giving free passage to a private Member’s Bill—not necessarily from me, but perhaps from a Government Member—for this proposal?

Paul Scully: There will always be stories, and it is important that we work through those stories and the evidence with regulators. I will come back to that in a second. I appreciate the case that the hon. Gentleman cites, but we must welcome the good pieces of work from the independent regulators. The Government also welcome industry innovation, particularly when it addresses such pertinent issues.

It is important that we recognise the work of regulators and businesses to improve outcomes for the bereaved, but there is still more work to be done, as the hon. Gentleman has just pointed out. I am grateful to him for seizing the initiative. It is essential that we give these issues the time and attention they deserve. The deeper our insight, the better equipped we are to explore the most valuable options for the consumer. A hastily developed approach may mean a worse outcome for consumers. For example, pursuing standardisation whereby all sectors must meet the most stringent security requirements for account closures may be unnecessary and add hassle for consumers at an enormously difficult time. It is costly to business and harmful to consumers who are in a vulnerable position.

In November last year, I convened the regulators and sponsor Departments to discuss what work can be done around the important issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised. We are working with regulators, industry and charity experts—

Sir John Hayes: Part of the issue is that too many services have gone online, which is to some degree a consequence of the current crisis. We need to encourage such businesses and agencies, particularly when they are dealing with older people, to have face-to-face or phone-to-phone contact. As far as e-government is concerned, we want more p-government, where p stands for people.

Paul Scully: My right hon. Friend talks about people, and people are at the heart of any business, service or organisation. Whether it is e or p, we cannot lose the personal.

This is exactly the kind of work that I want to continue with our regulators and sponsor Departments, to make sure that we can raise these issues, develop our understanding and put in any necessary action to support businesses in delivering the caring, simple processes that bereaved people need. I assure the hon. Member for Easington that improving outcomes for bereaved consumers remains a priority for Government.

As well as talking about the standard, the hon. Gentleman spoke about digital copies of death certification, and clarity for business and consumers to allow the markets to function more effectively. The Government are working with regulators to understand what we can do to provide more clarity and confidence for firms on the use of digital copies of death certificates. For the record, and to avoid conflating concepts, it should be noted that digital death certificates do not exist; digital copies of death certification refer to the scanned copies of documents.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about bereavement leave. I hope that with me, he will welcome Jack's law, which came into force last year, on parental bereavement

leave and pay. It is a good start. I know that he wants to go further, but we should bear in mind that this is a statutory minimum. When we look at workers' protections and workers' rights, which have been the subject of debate over the last few weeks, we see that all these things are statutory minimums. As a former employer who has run businesses, I know that doing the bare minimum is not good business practice; we invest in our people. We will always ask employers to go further.

The Government are working to better understand what issues and problems bereaved consumers persistently face in the essential service sectors. We support and value the good work that the regulators in those sectors have done and are doing on these issues, and we know that many businesses already offer bereaved customers both compassion and efficient service.

We remain committed to improving outcomes for all consumers experiencing vulnerability, including those facing bereavement, and we will continue to work through the issues that the hon. Member has raised and carefully consider his suggestions. We encourage all businesses to treat all consumers with compassion and understanding, particularly when those consumers are faced with emotional hardship, and we thank those that are already doing exactly that.

I thank the hon. Member once again for his contribution to the debate. I also thank the other hon. and right hon. Members who intervened and contributed, and everyone who continues to work hard to raise awareness of issues facing consumers dealing with bereavement and loss.

Question put and agreed to.

7.25 pm

House adjourned.

Members Eligible for a Proxy Vote

The following is the list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy:

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con)	Chris Loder
Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudon) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	Robert Courts (Witney) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson	Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain	John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	James Daly (Bury North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Mims Davies (Mid Sussex) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con)	Ben Everitt
Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Marsha De Cordova (Battersea)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Caroline Dinéage (Gosport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain	Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
		Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell	Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance)	Wendy Chamberlain
Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson	Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind)	Stuart Andrew
Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP)	Patrick Grady	Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind)	Stuart Andrew	Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Sir Alan Campbell (Ogmore) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell	Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell	John Glen (Salisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain	Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)	Patrick Grady

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Anthony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Green (Ashford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Grundy (Leigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	John Howell (Henley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP)	Ben Lake	Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Heapey (Wells) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell	Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	David Johnston (Wantage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
		Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
		Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Langan (High Peak) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con)	Mr William Wragg	Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Alan Mak (Havant) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson		
Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew		
Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy		
Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew		
Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew		

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West)	Patrick Grady	Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Damien Moore (Southport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (Con)	Sammy Wilson
Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain	Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Priti Patel (Witham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con)	Chris Loder	Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell	Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell	Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Will Quince (Colchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell	Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	John Spellar (Warley) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson	Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dean Russell (Watford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell	Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)	Ben Lake	Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con)	Mr William Wragg
Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell	Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	David Warburton (Somerset and Frome) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell	Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	John Whittingdale (Malden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Elizabeth Truss (South West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC)	Ben Lake
Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Gavin Williamson (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab)	Rachel Hopkins
Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell	Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con)	Chris Loder	Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ben Wallace (Wyre and Preston North)	Stuart Andrew	Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con)	Stuart Andrew		

Written Statements

Wednesday 3 February 2021

CABINET OFFICE

Census 2021: England and Wales

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): The census for England and Wales is scheduled to take place on 21 March 2021. The census is delivered for the UK Government and the Welsh Government by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), based on its recommendations published in the December 2018 White Paper “Help Shape Our Future”[CM 9745].

The information the census provides on the population and their characteristics, education, religion, ethnicity, working life and health ensures that decisions made by national and local government, community groups, charities and business are based on the best information possible. This enables a wide range of services and future planning to better serve communities and individuals across England and Wales.

This will be a digital-first census answered primarily online. The ONS has a target for online completion of 75%. People will be encouraged to respond online if they can on their mobile phones, laptops, PCs or tablets. Help will be available for those who need assistance, and members of the public who prefer to complete a paper form will be able to do so.

In the context of the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic, the safety of the public and the census field force is of the utmost importance to the Government and the ONS. The ONS has designed Census 2021 to be simple, straightforward and safe to complete, to ensure that everyone can be safely counted. Its assessment is that Census 2021 can be carried out safely and securely with the flexibility built into its operation to respond to any changes in risk levels or guidance. The main census field operation will begin only after census day. Field staff will never enter people’s houses; they will be supplied with PPE, will always be socially distanced and will work in line with all Government guidance.

The ONS has already launched its schools campaign; its national media campaign will be launched in the coming weeks telling people that Census 2021 is coming and the benefits of the census. On 22 January, the ONS published a statement on the importance of going ahead with the census in March 2021 and how they plan to do this safely for the public and census staff.

This statement is available on the ONS website: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/news/statementsandletters/census2021andcoronavirus>

Census plans have often had to anticipate and respond to events; for example, 20 years ago the census was delivered effectively during the foot and mouth crisis.

Other countries have been able to carry out their census activities during the pandemic—for example, the USA. The ONS has learnt valuable lessons from these experiences.

Following the ONS’s advice, the Government are confident that Census 2021 will be successful and provide a wealth of data reflecting the society we live in today, enabling national and local government, community groups, charities and businesses to better serve communities and individuals across England and Wales.

The census in Northern Ireland will take place at the same time as England and Wales; the census in Scotland will take place in March 2022 following the decision taken by the Scottish Government last year.

[HCWS755]

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Subsidy Control: Designing a New Approach for the UK

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): The Government are today publishing a consultation on “Subsidy control—Designing a new approach for the UK”. The consultation period will last for eight weeks.

Now that we have left the EU, the UK has the freedom to design our own subsidy control regime that is tailored to the UK’s national interests. The new system, which will be the long-term replacement for the EU’s prescriptive state aid regime, will be designed to be more flexible, agile and tailored to support business growth and innovation as well as maintain a competitive market economy and protect the UK internal market. It will better enable the Government to deliver on key priorities such as levelling up economic growth in the regions, tackling climate change, as well as supporting our economic recovery as we build back better from the covid-19 pandemic.

Unlike the EU’s state aid rules, which were designed for the particular circumstances of the EU, our own bespoke regime should work for the specific needs of the UK economy whilst also meeting our international commitments. Under the proposed UK system, local authorities, public bodies and the devolved Administrations in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast will be empowered to design taxpayer subsidies by following a set of UK-wide principles. These principles will ensure subsidies are designed to deliver strong benefits and good value for money for the UK taxpayer, while being awarded in a timely and effective way.

This consultation invites views from businesses, civil society, think tanks, academics, public authorities, and the devolved Administrations to ensure our new approach works for the UK economy and supports businesses and jobs in every part of the country. The Government are seeking views on any additions to the subsidy control principles that will underpin the regime, the appropriate role for an independent body within the new system and how best to ensure that subsidies deliver strong benefits, while minimising the risk from potentially harmful and distortive subsidies.

Subject to the outcomes of this consultation, the Government will bring forward primary legislation to establish in domestic law a system of subsidy control that works throughout the UK.

I will place copies of the consultation in the Libraries of both Houses, and it can also be found on gov.uk.

[HCWS754]

TREASURY**Non-domestic Rates: Billing Authorities****The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):**

Local Government is responsible for the administration of non-domestic rates in England. As part of this function, billing authorities will shortly begin preparing to issue annual rates bills to businesses. Nevertheless, as authorities will be aware, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make the Budget statement on 3 March 2021. The Budget will set out the

next phase of the Government's plans to tackle the virus, protect jobs and support business. Billing authorities in England should therefore consider issuing business rates bills after the Chancellor has set out his plan at the Budget.

The Government recognise the crucial work local authorities continue to do to support the pandemic response; by their taking this action, they believe it is in the public interest to avoid any potential confusion for businesses and to avoid the cost of having to re-bill businesses in light of any measures that may be included in the Budget.

[HCWS756]

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**not later than
Wednesday 10 February 2021**

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