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Monday 22 February 2021

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The House met at half-past Two 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.]

Mr Speaker: Before we come to questions, I would like to pay tribute to our friend and colleague from Catering Services, Julia Clifford, who passed away last week having contracted covid just after bravely fighting cancer.

Julia joined the House of Commons on 28 October 1985, having worked first in the old Westminster Cafeteria off Westminster Hall and then in the Members' Tea Room. She was a very hard-working and popular member of our parliamentary family who always had a smile and time for everybody. I will personally remember her for her sense of humour and in particular her love of animals—we often talked about her family and her pets. She will be greatly missed. I have asked the House authorities to consider renaming the Members' Tea Room Julia's Tea Room.

Our condolences go to her husband John, to her sons Ben and Jack, and to the rest of the family. In time, when we are able, we will hold a service to commemorate the lives of colleagues who have sadly passed away from covid. As I say, the Tea Room will never be the same: that smiling face, somebody who was happy, somebody who used to speak to us, somebody who was always there. No matter how down this House was, Julia was always there for all of us. She is sadly missed by us and by her colleagues in the Tea Room, but she will never ever be forgotten. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

High Streets

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to support high streets. [912369]

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): What steps he is taking to support high streets. [912370]

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to support high streets. [912374]

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): What steps he is taking to support high streets. [912383]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): May I associate myself and all on the Government Benches with the remarks you have just made with respect to Julia, Mr Speaker? We are all very saddened to hear of her death. As you said, service to this House comes in many forms and few have served it as well as she has. We all pass on our deepest condolences to her husband, family and friends.

The Government's response to the pandemic has seen billions of pounds of support flowing to our high streets through business grants, the furlough scheme and tax deferrals. We look to the future with renewed optimism through the progress of our world-beating vaccination programme, but we know the pandemic has magnified and accelerated market forces and will have a lasting impact on the high street. The role of high streets has always evolved. I am confident that it will do so again, provided there is the right leadership from local councils to make that happen. We are supporting councils and the pace of change through planning and licensing reform, preserving what is best about the high street at the heart of our local communities but enabling it to move forward with renewed confidence.

Mrs Drummond [V]: I, too, pass on my great sympathies to the family of Julia Clifford. She was indeed a great person and always cheerful.

High streets need to adapt to the changing nature of retail and become places that offer a chance for everyone to work, rest and play as well as shop. Does my right hon. Friend agree that planning policy must adapt, so that councils and businesses can make the changes they need to remain competitive and broaden their appeal to the public?

Robert Jenrick: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. We are seeing profound changes to the high street. As it begins to reopen later this year, we will need an extremely flexible planning system so that we can ensure that small businesses and entrepreneurs can adapt and evolve. We will need a mixed economy, ensuring that there are housing, leisure, shops and restaurants in town and city centres. That is what we are seeking to achieve. We have already put in place, at great speed, a number of significant planning reforms: for example, our reform of use class orders; the ability of local councils to hold markets and of pubs to have marquees in their gardens for longer than they would have in the past; and permitted development rights to enable businesses that are no longer viable to be turned into high-quality homes so that people of all ages can live in the towns in which they work.

Laura Trott [V]: The past year has been incredibly difficult for businesses on the high streets across Sevenoaks and Swanley, but while some landlords have shared that burden others have not. What more can the Government do to encourage landlords to adjust rents where businesses have lost significant trade, or indeed have been unable to trade?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend raises an important question. We are experiencing probably the most significant adjustment in commercial property in our lifetimes and the Government are doing a number of things to assist that process. First, we have helped businesses with their cash flow during the pandemic through the business rates holiday and the business grants that my right hon.

Friend the Chancellor has made available. Secondly, we have given businesses peace of mind during the most difficult months by introducing legislation to protect them from eviction, and from forms of insolvency and debt collection if they cannot pay their rent during this period. Finally, we have worked with the sector to publish a code of practice to help to support rent negotiations.

What are required now, if they have not happened already, are very urgent conversations or mediation, if that is necessary, between landlords and their tenants to ensure that where they can pay, they do so—we expect that to happen—and where they cannot pay, sensible, pragmatic arrangements are put in place. It is not in the interests of good landlords to lose viable businesses at this moment and we strongly encourage landlords, if they have not already, to have those productive conversations as quickly as they can.

Ben Bradley [V]: The town deal funding combined with levelling-up funds and others are potentially transformational for our high street and local economy in Mansfield, but we need some support. It seems likely that we may have to re-submit our bid this spring to try to get the maximum funding, so will the Secretary of State assure me that he will be able to get proper feedback and support for our new bid, and will he look at whether he might be able to give us some security by ensuring that we cannot get a lower amount if we try again?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend has been a doughty champion for Mansfield. I was very pleased that, in the summer of last year, we were able to provide Mansfield District Council with £1 million of accelerated funding to make immediate improvements to the town. He is right to say that, in some places, our experience is—both through the towns fund and the high streets fund—that local proposals have required further support and guidance to ensure that they meet the perfectly understandable value-for-money requirements put in place by my Department and the Treasury. We are going to help Mansfield to prepare its proposals. We have put in place consultancy arrangements to do that and I look forward to working with him.

Tom Hunt: Does my right hon. Friend agree that a significant part of regenerating our high streets needs to be bringing back into use old, historic buildings that have been out of use for far too long? That underlines why the Ipswich town deal bid is such a good bid, because at the heart of it, and the two most popular projects in the consultation, are plans to breathe new life into the Paul's silo building—£4 million on the waterfront—and the old Post Office building: two iconic buildings for Ipswich that need a breath of new life.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend and I share a personal interest in historic buildings and the culture and heritage of our towns and cities. Ipswich, as the county town of Suffolk, has a particularly rich heritage. We want to see historic buildings restored and regenerated, and that is a significant part of all the funds that we have made available to date and will be of their successors—the levelling-up fund and the UK shared prosperity fund. I very much look forward to working with him as he finalises his proposals and ensures that Ipswich gets the regeneration funding that it needs.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I offer my condolences on behalf of the Opposition to the family of Julia Clifford on their very, very sad loss.

High streets need support to help them to recover, so will the Secretary of State guarantee that the funding that all areas receive under the levelling-up fund will be at least as much as they received under their local growth deal?

Robert Jenrick: I am delighted to hear the hon. Gentleman's and the Opposition's new-found enthusiasm for business and supporting the wealth creators in this country. Of course, it was just over a year ago that they were supporting the overthrow of capitalism. The Leader of the Opposition's relaunch last week was not quite the Beveridge moment that it was billed as, but we will keep on supporting small businesses on the high street. The Chancellor has done that very successfully over the course of this year in difficult circumstances, with the business rates holiday, the cut in VAT and the support for business grants. We are going to be doing more, as the hon. Gentleman said, with the £4 billion levelling-up fund, which builds on the success of the £3.6 billion towns fund. That will ensure that communities across the country—but particularly those that are furthest away from the labour market, have the highest levels of deprivation and have not seen the levels of Government investment that we would wish hitherto—get the funding that they need to move forward into the year.

New Homes

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the supply of new homes. [912371]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): The first word in “Build back better” is, of course, “build”, and one of the key priorities for my Department throughout the pandemic has been to ensure that house building continues and the housing market stays open. This Government have gone to great lengths to keep the housing industry open, in turn sustaining hundreds of thousands of people's jobs and livelihoods. House building and the whole ecosystem that it supports, from show homes to home maintenance, have been able to continue during the pandemic and to do so safely. This was shown in the third quarter statistics last year, where housing starts were up 111% on the first quarter and completions were up 185%. At the same time, we are seeing the biggest investment in affordable homes for a decade, delivering much-needed new homes on brownfield land through our £7.1 billion national home building fund.

Mark Pawsey [V]: I wonder whether the Secretary of State has seen the reports in *The Times* today showing high levels of interest in new houses with open space. That is certainly the case at Houlton in my constituency, where the master developer of a 6,000-home site, Urban&Civic, has put green space and a sense of community at its heart, and surpassed its target with 513 occupations in the last three months and a further 310 homes currently under construction. Does he agree that the provision of high-quality open space should be a key part of all housing developments, and will he come to Houlton to see the great work that is being done there, as soon as he is able to do so?

Robert Jenrick: I would be delighted to visit my hon. Friend in Houlton, and I pay tribute to Urban&Civic, which I know well. It is a developer that has carefully masterplanned large sites and tried, where it can, to weave in trees, public realm and public spaces, which is exactly the right way forward. I was pleased to see that it has now been taken over by the Wellcome Trust, which says something about the sort of projects that it will take forward in the future: high-quality, sustainable communities. I have made it a personal priority to ensure that new developments are well-planned. That is why we brought forward the national model design code, and we are also changing the law so that all new streets that are built in this country will be tree lined.

Covid-19: Local Authority Support

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support local authorities during the covid-19 outbreak. [912391]

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): The Government have allocated more than £8 billion directly to councils since the start of the pandemic. In addition, councils will receive more than £3 billion of support in 2021-22 for both additional expenditure and loss of income. That takes the total support committed to councils in England to tackle the impacts of covid-19 to more than £11 billion.

Theresa Villiers: I sincerely thank Ministers for the substantial financial support they have given to local government at this difficult time. May I appeal to them to continue that, not least to enable local authorities to play their part in supporting people to live healthier lives with more exercise and recreation, so that we can generate the broader health recovery that this outbreak tells us we need?

Luke Hall: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. She is absolutely right. This is why it is so vital that we have provided a 4.6% cash-terms increase to local government next year—a real-terms increase. I am delighted that in Barnet that means a 5% increase in core spending power—another £14 million next year to spend on local priorities, just as she mentions. Funding and supporting local government, which has been the backbone of our response to covid-19, remain an absolute priority for this Department.

Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): What response his Department has made to the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission's final report. [912373]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): People want to live in strong communities where they can see their unique character, heritage and culture reflected and respected in the buildings they pass in their daily lives, so the Government have established the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission to do just that, by championing beauty in the built environment. We have recently published a comprehensive response to the report, and will be implementing the vast majority of its recommendations. That includes embedding the principle of beauty in the

planning system for the first time since it was created in the post-war years; publishing a new national model design code so that communities can demand well-designed local buildings; and establishing a fast track for beauty, where individuals and good-quality builders can see high-quality developments proceed at pace.

Simon Fell [V]: I am delighted by my right hon. Friend's response. This is a vital report and it will make a huge difference to future developments in communities such as mine when these proposals are taken forward. We have a number of exciting developments across Furness, from Hartley's Brewery in Ulverston to Salthouse sands in Barrow, which are actively seeking to celebrate local history. How best can those developers engage with my right hon. Friend's Department to ensure that they meet the proposed standards?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend represents one of the most beautiful constituencies in the country, one with a very rich heritage, and I understand why he would want to see that preserved and enhanced, as do we. The developer community should now be engaging with our national model design code and his own local councils should now bring forward their own version of that. My Department stands ready, with our new place unit, to support local councils to produce high-quality, compelling and locally popular design codes. We will be piloting that over the course of the year—perhaps his local council might like to be one of the pilot areas.

Regional Inequality: Local Authority Funding

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure that local authority funding is used to tackle regional inequality. [R] [912375]

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that local authority funding is used to tackle regional inequality. [912385]

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): This month, the local government finance settlement was passed by the House, delivering a 4.6% rise in core spending power to councils across the country. For England, we are committed to putting funding where there is relative need, irrespective of the location, which is why councils in the most deprived areas of the country receive 16% more in grant funding than the least deprived areas.

Dan Jarvis [V]: Here in South Yorkshire, we used European Union and local growth funds to support our economy, attract investment and create good jobs. Now that they have come to an end, can the Minister guarantee that their replacements—the shared prosperity and levelling-up funds—will give local leaders the flexibility and capacity to invest that money to rebuild our communities?

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for the constructive way in which he continues to work with the Government. The levelling-up fund is worth £4 billion. It will be invested in local infrastructure that will have a real and visible impact on our communities, whether that be a new bypass, an upgraded railway station, museums, more libraries, or better high streets and town centres. The fund will be allocated competitively

and we will be publishing a prospectus for it soon. We are also providing £220 million of additional UK funding next year to support communities to pilot programmes and new approaches in preparation for the UK shared prosperity fund. We will publish the prospectus for this funding soon. I assure him that this funding will be at the heart of the levelling-up agenda, benefiting communities across the country. As always, I will be happy to discuss the detail with him when those prospectuses are published.

Fay Jones [V]: Powys County Council has historically received one of the lowest local government allocations across Wales from the Welsh Government. As a consequence, the local authority is considering closing four rural schools in Brecon and Radnorshire, deepening rural inequality even further. Will the Minister confirm that the Welsh Government have the funding to prevent that and that they could even use the extra funding given to them by the UK Government as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, which they have yet to spend?

Luke Hall: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She is right to say that we have given Wales £5.2 billion of guaranteed up-front funding this year, and we have now confirmed an additional £650 million for the Welsh Government to support public services affected by covid-19. Of course, local government is a devolved responsibility, and it is for the Welsh Government to decide how to use the substantial funds the UK Government are providing them with. I encourage them to meet my hon. Friend to discuss how best to protect the vital public services that she has rightly highlighted on behalf of her community.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab) [V]: Few details of the shared prosperity fund have been published. Will the Minister guarantee that the fund will be used to tackle regional inequality, as intended, that no region will lose out and that the Government will not force councils to compete against one another, wasting time and resources when they could be getting on with providing services that local people depend on?

Luke Hall: I can certainly assure the hon. Lady that the UK shared prosperity fund will help level up and create opportunity right across our country in the places that need it the most, be they ex-industrial areas, deprived towns or rural communities, and for people who face labour market barriers. It is going to operate UK-wide, using the new financial assistance powers in the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. We will ramp up funding so that total domestic UK-wide funding will at least match receipts, reaching about £1.5 billion a year.

Shared Prosperity Fund

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations on the shared prosperity fund. [912376]

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): We will work both with the devolved Administrations and local communities to ensure that the UK shared prosperity fund supports citizens right across the country. We have demonstrated that commitment by confirming that the devolved Administrations will have a place within the governance structures for the fund.

Marion Fellows [V]: Mr Speaker, that was a wonderful tribute to Julia and I really appreciate your making it. I associate myself with it and pass on my deepest condolences to her family. She will be sadly missed by the Scottish National party group at Westminster.

Will the Minister please explain when exactly we will learn what the mechanism will be for involving the Scottish Government in decisions about which people, communities and local businesses will receive the funding necessary to enable them to level up? Who will be the final arbiter? How much money will be available? When will the process begin?

Luke Hall: The money is well known about, and we published the heads of terms document last year. Investment to replace EU structural funds will increase in each of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland next year, compared with this financial year, thanks to the funds that the Chancellor is putting in. We will ramp up total domestic UK-wide funding so that it will at least match EU receipts, reaching around £1.5 billion a year. Further details of the operation of the additional funding will be published soon, but in the meantime we will continue to engage with the devolved Administrations on the important additional funds.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: I am pleased to hear that the Minister apparently just confirmed that Scotland will not receive a single penny less under the UK shared prosperity funding scheme. I am sure that that news will be welcomed in Scotland. Will he confirm that the priorities for Scotland will continue to be set in Scotland, by the people of Scotland and the democratically elected Government of Scotland?

Luke Hall: Of course, the first part of the hon. Lady's question was confirmed in a manifesto commitment from this Government. I assure her that we have been having engagement events right across the United Kingdom, with 16 such events in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We have confirmed that the devolved Administrations will have a place in the oversight of the fund; we have been working closely with them, and I will reach out to them soon to organise discussions about the delivery of the fund directly into Scotland.

Covid-19: Support for Schools

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the provision of financial support by local authorities for schools during the covid-19 outbreak. [912378]

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): We regularly engage with the Department for Education on matters relating to local authorities' finances. We have provided £4.6 billion of un-ringfenced funds to councils to manage a range of covid-19-related pressures. The DFE has already distributed £102 million for exceptional covid-related costs incurred by schools and will shortly process claims made in December.

Munira Wilson [V]: Many primary schools in Twickenham are struggling with the double whammy of the costs of making their sites covid secure and the lost income from lettings and fundraising, and the Department for Education has not reimbursed a lot of those costs.

The Minister for School Standards has repeatedly told me that schools that have low reserves and face severe financial difficulties should seek support from their local authority, so will the Minister be making funds available to local authorities specifically to support schools in need? If not, will he issue guidance on the use of existing covid funding to local authorities, which is already insufficient to meet their covid costs?

Luke Hall: I completely reject the last part of the hon. Lady's question, in which she said that funding is insufficient. Local authorities are projected to spend £6.9 billion on covid-related pressures this year. We have already provided them with £8 billion of support and we have confirmed a total of £11 billion of support. We have allocated directly to councils £4.6 billion of un-ringfenced funds, of which Richmond has received £12.5 million. That means that Richmond can allocate funding according to local priorities—it is for the council to make decisions on how the funds are best used, including in schools. We recognise that councils are best placed to understand the needs of their populations. I know how important this issue is to the hon. Lady, so I am always happy to meet her to discuss it in greater depth.

Local Authority Funding: Cumbria

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase funding for local authorities in Cumbria. [912379]

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): Core spending power in England will rise from £49 billion in this financial year to £51.3 billion in 2021-22, which is a 4.6% cash-terms increase—a real-terms rise. Councils in Cumbria will see their core spending power rise to more than £483 million—a 4.5% increase in cash terms—and they will also receive more than £30 million in un-ringfenced covid support to help them to build back better in the next financial year.

Dr Hudson [V]: Rural bus services are a lifeline for people in Penrith and The Border. In 2014, Cumbria County Council decided to stop using central Government funds to subsidise commercial bus services, which has had a negative impact on provision, meaning that some communities in Cumbria are no longer served by regular bus routes. Does my hon. Friend agree that the council should change its position and use the available funds to support rural bus routes to allow people to go about their lives, reconnect and help to address the issue of rural isolation?

Luke Hall: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is a champion for the community that he represents. He is certainly right that Cumbria County Council has the flexibility to invest in these bus services, perhaps even using some of the £20 million increase that it will receive through the local government finance settlement. Through the Department for Transport, we are also providing an additional £20 million rural mobility fund to support services in rural and suburban areas, and Cumbria has been successful at phase 1 and has recently submitted a business case for review at phase 2, but he is absolutely right to raise this matter. The council does have the flexibility to make these decisions, which I know is of huge importance to him and to his constituents.

Cladding Removal

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): What progress he has made on the design of the loan scheme to fund the removal of cladding on buildings under 18 metres in height. [912381]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): Hundreds of thousands of leaseholders will be protected from the cost of replacing unsafe cladding. Funding will be targeted at the highest-risk buildings in line with long-standing independent expert advice and evidence, while lower-rise buildings with a lower risk profile will gain new protection from the costs of cladding removal through the long-term, low-interest, Government-backed finance scheme through which leaseholders will pay no more than £50 per month. We will publish more details on how the scheme will work as soon as we are in a position to do so.

Mr Betts [V]: I thank the Minister for his answer; I look forward to more details. In the meantime, will he confirm that the loan will be a charge on the freeholder, that there will be no addition to the debt of any individual leaseholder, and that it will not affect the valuation of leasehold properties? On the money that is to be raised from the levy and financial contributions, will that be in addition to the £3.5 billion that the Government have announced, or will it go to offset the amount of the £3.5 billion that the Government will have to find?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to the Chairman of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee for his question. We certainly do not wish for any costs to follow the leaseholder through their life, so he is certainly right to assume that the charge will be applied to the building and not to the leaseholder and that, therefore, their credit rating will not be affected by it. He also asked about how the funding mechanism will work. The Chancellor will say more about that at the Budget, so I do not think I should say any more at this point, but we certainly want to ensure that leaseholders are appropriately and properly protected from unforeseen and unfair costs.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab) [V]: I remind the Minister that, 17 times from the Dispatch Box, the Government have made a commitment to leaseholders that they will not pay. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government announced last week that funding for cladding removal would not include buildings under 18 metres and that those in homes below 18 metres would be forced into life-changing debts to pay for a problem that they did not cause. But 18 metres is a “crude” height limit that “does not reflect the complexity of the challenge at hand.”—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2020; Vol. 670, c. 24.]

Those are not my words, Mr Speaker, but the words of the Secretary of State last year, so what has changed?

Christopher Pincher: The 18-metre threshold is well established as a reasonable threshold for assessing risk. It has featured in statutory guidance since at least the 1970s. It is used by the National Fire Chiefs Council in its operational guidance; it is used by the Building Research Establishment; it was used by the independent expert panel; and it was used by Dame Judith Hackitt, who, I remind the hon. Lady, said only yesterday in

The Sunday Telegraph that our proposals are “sensible”. I hope that, with this advantage, she will read what Dame Judith has said and perhaps reflect on the question that she has asked.

Thangam Debbonaire: Frankly, I do not think that will be of any comfort to the leaseholders, who were told that they would not be asked to pay and are still living in buildings with flammable cladding and other fire risks. The Housing Minister says that he is taking a risk-based approach, but in the papers today it is alleged that a senior civil servant said in 2018 that the real reason for 18 metres was

“because we haven’t got time to come up with a better number.”

That was two years ago. Whatever the reason, why have the Government not used the time for a proper system of risk prioritisation or even responded to their own call for evidence, which closed a year ago this week?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to the hon. Lady. We have looked very closely at the evidence, and have always been guided by safety. Safety is our paramount concern. As I say, the Building Research Establishment, the National Fire Chiefs Council, the independent expert panel and Dame Judith herself all say that 18 metres is an appropriate trigger properly to assess the highest risk. Such buildings are four times more likely to result in injury or fatality if they suffer a fire than lower-rise buildings. We have also introduced—as the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), has rightly identified—a mechanism to ensure that people living in lower-rise buildings are able to take advantage of finance to ensure that their homes are remediated, so that the value is properly reascribed to them and those people can get on with living their lives.

Planning Reform

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to reform planning rules in England.

[912382]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): We are transforming the planning system through recently announced changes and ambitious long-term reports. Our White Paper, published in August last year, proposes a comprehensive reform of the old planning system. We have also recently published changes to the calculation of local housing need, to enable more homes to come forward where we need them most, and the new national model design code, which will help to drive up the quality of new development.

Jason McCartney [V]: Labour-run Kirklees Council’s local plan keeps seeing unsustainable housing developments being approved on greenfield sites, with shoddy build quality, flooding issues, and the allocated section 106 funding—supposedly for community infrastructure—just not coming through for those communities. What would the Minister say to my constituents, who are totally fed up with the shambolic planning situation under Kirklees Council?

Christopher Pincher: I would simply say this: if my hon. Friend’s constituents are totally fed up with their shambolic council, they should totally get rid of their shambolic council at the local elections. If they want a party and a Government who will ensure that we have

the best planning system that the hon. Gentleman wants—one that will ensure we introduce a raft of measures to drive better design and better quality, to minimise flood risk and to provide the real infrastructure that local communities want—they should vote accordingly at the local elections, and I suggest that they vote Conservative.

Mr Speaker: Thank goodness we are not having a political broadcast, as we now move to the shadow Minister in Yorkshire, Naz Shah.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab) [V]: Cumbria County Council has been hemmed in by the planning system over the application for the west Cumbria coalmine, which it will likely be forced to pass to avoid the threat of legal costs. This is despite the environmental damage and the small number of unsustainable jobs that the mine will create. Leaving aside fixing the flaws in a system that allows for the opening of a polluting coalmine in the year that the UK hosts COP26, will the Secretary of State now do the right thing on this issue of national—if not global—importance, block this application and work with his colleagues in the Cabinet to provide the long-term, secure and green jobs that west Cumbrians deserve instead?

Christopher Pincher: The hon. Lady and the House know full well that our green credentials are second to none. The hon. Lady also knows that I will not and cannot comment on an individual planning application. What I can say is that there is a high bar to be passed for a local decision to be assessed by the Secretary of State. We believe—the law believes—that it is always best to leave local communities to make decisions for themselves, and that is what we have done in this case.

Home Ownership

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote home ownership. [912384]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): Central to this Government’s mission is the promise of helping more people to achieve the dream of home ownership. That is why we have introduced a new shared ownership model cutting the minimum stake that someone needs to buy a home of their own to 10% and allowing them to increase in 1% steps. Thousands more people will benefit, as up to 50% of the homes delivered through our new affordable homes programme will be shared ownership, with those in rented homes being given the right to shared ownership. This all comes on top of our new Help to Buy scheme, which specifically targets first-time buyers, our First Homes policy, which discounts new homes by at least 30%, and our landmark leasehold reforms announced earlier in the year.

Kevin Hollinrake [V]: City of York Council is already the subject of written warnings by the Secretary of State’s Department for its failure to produce its first local plan since the 1950s, and has now again been reprimanded by inspectors for delays and errors in the production of that plan. Will he now step in and have this plan drafted for the council to send a clear message to it, and to any other council, that we will not tolerate those who seek to prevent the delivery of homes for rental and ownership?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend will appreciate that in my quasi-judicial role I cannot comment on York's plan, other than to say that it is long overdue, as he says. York is one of those communities that have failed to produce a plan for a very long time. We have a plan-based system in this country, and the planning reforms that I am bringing forward place greater emphasis than ever on these local plans. One has to have a local plan in order to make the system succeed. It is not optional. Local areas that take too long or do not produce those plans, including York, will need to face the consequences, and we will have to consider how we need to proceed if they do not bring one forward quickly.

First-time Home Buyers

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps he is taking to support first-time home buyers in parts of the UK with the highest house prices. [912386]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): This Government are making the dream of home ownership a reality, with the number of first-time buyers now at its highest level for 12 years. Over the past decade, our schemes such as Help to Buy and Right to Buy have helped nearly 700,000 families to buy a home of their own. Applications for the Help to Buy affordable new build scheme in Scotland have now been closed and the Scottish first home fund is currently paused, but the people of Scotland need not worry: we are working very closely with the Chancellor on how to increase the options for first-time buyers looking to access mortgages across the United Kingdom, which will, in turn, help more people in Scotland to become homeowners, from Glasgow to Inverness.

Jamie Stone [V]: It is a fact that second home buyers often price out young first-time buyers in the highlands, and this of course takes me to that dread old spectre of highland depopulation. So on a personal level I would be extremely grateful if the Secretary of State could share his thinking and his methodology with the Scottish Government, and make every encouraging noise that he can to the Scottish Government, to make sure that young local people can buy homes in the highlands and live and work there in the years to come.

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman and I share the same view that young people in this country should have every right to get on the housing ladder, like those of us who were fortunate enough to do so in previous years. It is a shame that the Scottish Government have chosen to close the Help to Buy scheme and to pause the first home fund without bringing forward any credible alternatives. Of course many of these issues are devolved, but where the Chancellor and I can take action in Scotland, we certainly will. As I said earlier, we are working very closely with the big banks on a UK-wide basis to see what more we can do to help first-time buyers access high loan to value mortgages and get on the ladder.

Energy-efficient Housebuilding

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote energy-efficient house building. [912387]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Eddie Hughes): I thank my hon. Friend for his question, not least because as a proud member of the Chartered Institute of Building I take a keen interest in all things related to energy-efficient house building, so I am personally delighted that from 2025 the future homes standard will ensure that new homes produce at least 75% less carbon dioxide emissions than those built to current standards. These homes will be future-proofed, with low-carbon heating, high levels of energy efficiency, and no further refit work needed to enable them to become zero-carbon over time, alongside the electric energy grid.

Andrew Selous [V]: British architects such as Bill Dunster are building not only energy-efficient homes but zero bills homes, which are brilliant for the planet as well as helping us relieve poverty. Will the Government commit that we will aim for the very highest standards, not least so that we do not have to retrofit later?

Eddie Hughes: We are indeed aiming for the very highest standards; I do not think anybody could accuse us of being anything other than very ambitious. While some of the sector is already leading the way by building highly efficient, low-carbon buildings, it is important that all parts of the industry are ready to build homes that are fit for a zero-carbon future. The timeline we have set out delivers on our net zero commitments while providing industry with the time it needs to develop the supply chains and skills that will be necessary. I am hoping that I will get to join my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing on his visit to the ZEDfactory in due course.

Topical Questions

[912324] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): On Saturday, I was delighted to announce that the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government will be opening a new dual headquarters in the great city of Wolverhampton, taking Ministers, senior civil servants and decision makers to the west midlands. We are leading efforts to level up all parts of the country, so it is only right that MHCLG brings decision makers to the communities that we seek to serve. This is about more than just the hundreds of jobs that we will bring to the region, with 800 MHCLG staff outside London by 2030—it is about pride, prestige, proximity to power, ensuring that more local voices are reflected in the creation of Government policy and playing our part in raising the stature of smaller cities such as Wolverhampton, which have been undervalued by Governments hitherto.

Earlier today, I was pleased to meet representatives from Wolverhampton, who included—you will be pleased to know, Mr Speaker, as a supporter of Chorley FC—the mighty Wolverhampton Wanderers football club. All at the Ministry look forward to being an integral part of the great city of Wolverhampton and the wider west midlands.

Mr Speaker: I think the Secretary of State means the team that scraped through.

Sarah Olney [V]: Can the Secretary of State tell me what projections have been made of the impact on homelessness of the ending of the protection for renters at the end of next month? What provision will be made to assist local authorities in supporting those who find themselves evicted?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon Friend the Lord Chancellor and I are working to consider what further steps are necessary. We will hear in a few moments' time the Prime Minister's statement, which will set out the road map for the reopening of our economy, but it is important that we keep in place measures that protect the most vulnerable in society, including those who are renting. That is exactly what we have done since the beginning of the pandemic, and I intend to keep doing so for as long as is necessary.

The hon. Lady will also be aware that we have spent more than £700 million protecting rough sleepers in her part of the country and across the whole of England. We have helped more than 34,000 of the most vulnerable people in society into safe and secure accommodation, and we intend to build on that over the course of the year as we move forward with our pledge to end rough sleeping.

[912325] **Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) [V]:** With Prestatyn facing the imminent closure of TSB, Barclays and HSBC, and following the loss of NatWest and the Royal Bank of Scotland in recent years, the town's high street will be left without a single bank or cash machine, despite being a major regional shopping centre. Can my right hon. Friend outline what conversations he is holding with major banks to ensure an adequate and fair distribution of banking facilities in high streets across the UK?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We went into the pandemic as one of the leading countries in the world in terms of having a cashless society. The chief executive of the Royal Mint, based in Llantrisant in Wales, has suggested recently that coin use may have dropped by as much as a fifth over the course of the pandemic, and much of that will not be restored afterwards, so it is important that we protect access to cash for the most vulnerable in society, including those in smaller towns, villages and rural areas. My right hon Friend the Chancellor has committed to doing just that and ensuring that the infrastructure that supports cash is sustainable in the long term. That includes proposals that would see cashback offered at shops without consumers having to make a purchase.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: The Resolution Foundation has found that 450,000 households have fallen into rent arrears since last January due to the covid pandemic. Does the Secretary of State think the Government's decision to freeze local housing allowance will improve that situation or make it worse, and what objections has he raised in Cabinet about this freeze?

Robert Jenrick: I am proud of the response that this Government have made to the pandemic. At every turn, we have tried to protect the most vulnerable people in society. My Department has protected renters through bringing forward the moratorium on evictions. We raised the local housing allowance to the 30th percentile, ensuring

that there is more support for those people who need it. In England, we have supported rough sleepers, those shielding and many of the most vulnerable people; that is absolutely right. Our record stands up very well compared with that of the Scottish Government. In fact, the courts in Scotland opened long before those in England, ensuring that people in England were protected from eviction while those in Scotland were being evicted.

[912326] **Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con):** Hull City Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council submitted their bid for East Yorkshire devolution some months ago. That included a request for full allocation for the Goole town deal bid, but I digress. Can the Minister tell me where we are with regard to opening up negotiations with Hull and East Riding of Yorkshire, to get East Yorkshire devolution moving forwards?

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): We have a clear commitment to give more power to local communities, providing opportunity across the country. We want to build on the more than 50% of the north now covered by our devolution deals, with a new deal in West Yorkshire signed in Parliament just last month. We welcomed the devolution proposal from Hull and East Riding of Yorkshire, and my Department will respond shortly, with a view to further formal engagement with councils following the local government elections. I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend to talk about this in greater depth.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Last week, *The Sunday Times* revealed that property developers who have built flats covered in dangerous cladding have donated £2.5 million to the Conservative party since 2017. This comes after the 10 biggest house builders have made £15 billion in profit since the Grenfell Tower disaster, and of course, they have made a tidy sum during the covid-19 pandemic from a market boom fuelled by the stamp duty holiday. The Housing Secretary said he believes in the polluter pays principle. Why, then, are leaseholders still footing the bill for the building safety crisis?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman may have missed my statement to the House the other day in which I announced on behalf of the Chancellor that we will be bringing forward levies and taxes on the property development industry. *[Interruption.]* He suggests that they are too low, but he does not know what the scale of them is, and he will have to wait until my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announces them in due course. We will ensure that those who created this situation pay for it. I would add that many of these buildings—in fact, the lion's share of them—were built under the last Labour Government, who did nothing to tackle this issue. We are clearing up the mess. We are bringing forward an entirely new building safety regime, which will be world class and ensure that people can always be safe and feel safe in their homes.

[912327] **Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con) [V]:** Time and again, constituents raise with me their worries about the state of the town centre. The UK Government's £3.6 billion towns fund in England is a fantastic initiative. Could my right hon. Friend confirm that the full Barnett consequential from that has been passed to the Welsh

Government, so that my constituents can benefit, should Cardiff Bay choose to make towns a priority, as this Government are doing?

Robert Jenrick: As my hon. Friend notes, the £3.6 billion towns fund is being delivered in England with great success. There is, however, nothing to prevent the Welsh Government from investing in the same way in towns such as the one that he represents across Wales. At the latest spending review, the Welsh Government received an additional £1.3 billion for the next financial year through the Barnett formula and £12 million through changes in my Department's overall settlement. I strongly encourage him to hold the Welsh Government to account and ensure that they invest more in communities such as the one that he serves.

[912332] **Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab) [V]: The strong message I have received from businesses in Ilford town centre and on high streets across my constituency is that action on business rates is needed to help high street businesses. Can the Secretary of State have a word with the Chancellor to make sure that that support is in place, so that when people return to their high streets, there are still some shops there to serve them?

Robert Jenrick: I do not think my right hon. Friend needs any reminding; he of course was the Chancellor who gave us the business rates holiday that has supported hundreds of thousands of businesses on every high street across the country. The hon. Gentleman will have to wait till the Budget next week, where the Chancellor will be setting out how he intends to continue supporting businesses and jobs in all parts of the United Kingdom over the course of the year.

[912328] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Secretary of State condemn the astonishing decision by the Mayor of London to spend thousands of pounds on a committee to take down statues and rename streets? Is this not a good reason to vote for Shaun Bailey as the new Conservative Mayor of London?

Robert Jenrick: I agree wholeheartedly with my right hon. Friend. It does speak to the priorities of the current Mayor of London that he would devote so much time to statues and street names, rather than to the things that really matter to people in London, which are tackling crime, ensuring they do not have to pay his 10% mayoral precept on their council tax and ensuring that good-quality affordable homes are built in the places people want to see them.

[912335] **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): We all know that, despite the Prime Minister's experience as a Mayor, he has called the devolution settlement a "disaster" and a "mistake". Is that loathing of Scotland's Parliament perhaps the real reason why the Government are ripping up the devolution settlement, grabbing back our powers and imposing a shared prosperity fund that bypasses the democratically elected Members of the Scottish Parliament and bears very little resemblance to the needs or wants of the Scottish electorate?

Robert Jenrick: This Government were elected on a clear manifesto pledge to ensure that we level up all parts of this United Kingdom, including the communities that the hon. Member serves in Scotland, and that is exactly what we intend to do. The UK shared prosperity

fund will ensure that at least as much—if not more—funding goes to communities in Scotland as would have been received if we had stayed within the European Union. He seems to have a strange aversion to localism and to ensuring that local authorities in Scotland—democratically elected councillors in his constituency and others—have a say over the future of their areas.

[912329] **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con) [V]: Since I was elected, I have been speaking up for Exmouth and East Devon in Parliament, and working hard to secure support for our hospitality industry, Exeter airport and the mighty Exeter Chiefs. Exmouth continues to grow, and I want to work with East Devon District Council to help the town stay a great place to live and work. Could the Secretary of State provide an update on when the next round of funding to improve towns, transport and high streets will be made available?

Robert Jenrick: I very much enjoyed visiting East Devon during the general election campaign, and I look forward to seeing Exmouth's application in due course. As I said then, Exmouth is exactly the sort of town that we want to benefit from the town regeneration funds that we have made available. I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that we are driving forward our plans to boost town centre regeneration in every corner of the country. The levelling-up fund and the UK shared prosperity fund will build on the work of the future high streets fund and the towns fund, and the prospectuses for those will be published very soon. I hope East Devon District Council will work with him to grasp this opportunity and put in good proposals that we can consider carefully.

[912342] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab) [V]: Census 2021 is due in just a few weeks' time, at a time when cities such as Cambridge would normally be packed with students, researchers and visitors. In the middle of a pandemic, does the Secretary of State really think we will get accurate figures? Remember that these figures are going to be used for the next 10 years.

Luke Hall: Of course, we are working closely with the Cabinet Office on the delivery of the elections and the census. We have provided extra funds to make sure they can be delivered safely, and we have published guidance alongside that as well. We have also committed, for the coming year, £11 billion directly to councils since the start of the pandemic, of which Cambridge City Council has so far received more than £5.4 million. On top of that, it will have the additional funding to help it deliver elections, and its share of the £1.55 billion that we have announced to help with covid-related pressures next year, including election pressures.

[912330] **Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Con): I welcome the upcoming leasehold reform legislation, but I do worry that the provisions may not apply for the benefit of my constituents in Delyn and across Wales. Will my right hon. Friend tell us what discussions he has had with the Welsh Government to assist them in ensuring that my constituents are not left behind by Labour once again?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is right to welcome the landmark reforms that we announced earlier in the year, which will be the biggest changes to English property law for over 40 years. Of course, I would like to see them apply in Wales as well, and we have had conversations

with colleagues in the Welsh Government. I strongly encourage them to take the same approach as us, which is to ensure there is always fairness for leaseholders, and that those reforms come into place across the whole of England and Wales.

[912345] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: Given the scale of need for help with home adaptations for the rising number of older people with disabilities, dementia and now the impacts of long covid, will the Secretary of State commit to increasing disabled facilities grant funding so that local authorities like Bedford Borough Council can stand a chance of meeting local need?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and we are actively considering it. We have responded to a consultation on how we can improve access to public buildings and to homes for disabled people, and if there is more we can do, we should do it.

[912331] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for the support given to councils over the past 12 months, but as we move into what will hopefully be a busy summer for tourism in areas such as North Devon, based on the experience of last summer, some smaller district and parish councils that operate car parks, toilets, and waste and dog bin collections struggle to finance and maintain them effectively to the understandably higher standards that are needed, so can he advise what support is being given to ensure that councils with tourism hotspots are prepared for the likely influx of visitors this summer?

Luke Hall: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We are hugely grateful to parish and town councils, which have been on the frontline in responding to this pandemic. That is why the Secretary of State wrote to them earlier this year to encourage principal councils to work with them to discuss funding. Councils in Devon will receive a further £31 million in un-ringfenced covid funding next year, which will help to ensure that their facilities are maintained and ready for the summer. Finally, I am delighted that my hon. Friend's constituency has received an offer of £6.5 million from our future high streets fund, which I understand will go towards refurbishment of the historic market quarter.

[912352] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Considering local government reform, the five boroughs and districts of Warwickshire have spent over £100,000 on a report by Deloitte, and I understand that Warwickshire County Council has spent over £50,000 with PricewaterhouseCoopers. Deloitte found that it would be favourable for one sort of authority, while PricewaterhouseCoopers decided that county councils should remain as is. Is that a good use of public money?

Luke Hall: Those individual decisions are decisions for local authorities. I can certainly inform the hon. Gentleman that Warwick has received over £3.7 million this year in covid funding, and is receiving a 4.8% real-terms rise in core spending power this current financial year, but the individual decision to which he has referred is for the council to make.

[912333] **Paul Holmes** (Eastleigh) (Con) [V]: The Minister will be aware of plans by Lib Dem Eastleigh Borough Council to build and develop 2,500 houses in the village of Horton Heath. I know that the Minister cannot comment on specific planning applications, but what general advice can he give my constituents, who are concerned about the council acting as both the developer and the planning authority while seemingly ignoring statutory bodies such as the Environment Agency?

Robert Jenrick: I am aware of my hon. Friend's concerns regarding the new development at Horton Heath. As he says, I cannot comment on individual planning cases, but he is right that where a local council acts as the developer and master planner of a particular site it is incumbent upon it to ensure that it takes account of the views of statutory consultees such as the Environment Agency, of the local community and, indeed, of strong local Members of Parliament like him.

Mr Speaker: I am suspending the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

3.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Road Map

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the Prime Minister, I would like to point out that a British Sign Language interpretation of the statement is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv. I now call the Prime Minister to make his statement.

3.36 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the road map that will guide us cautiously but irreversibly towards reclaiming our freedoms, while doing all we can to protect our people against covid. Today's measures will apply in England, but we are working closely with the devolved Administrations, who are setting out similar plans.

The threat remains substantial, with the numbers in hospital only now beginning to fall below the peak of the first wave last April, but we are able to take these steps because of the resolve of the British public and the extraordinary success of our NHS in vaccinating over 17.5 million people across the UK. The data so far suggest both vaccines are effective against the dominant strains of covid. Public Health England has found that one dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine reduces hospitalisations and deaths by at least 75%, and early data suggest that the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine provides a good level of protection, although since we only started deploying this vaccine last month, at this stage the size of the effect is less certain. But no vaccine can ever be 100% effective, nor will everyone take them up, and like all viruses, covid-19 will mutate.

As the modelling released today by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies shows, we cannot escape the fact that lifting lockdown will result in more cases, more hospitalisations, and sadly more deaths. This will happen whenever lockdown is lifted, whether now or in six or nine months, because there will always be some vulnerable people who are not protected by the vaccines. There is therefore no credible route to a zero-covid Britain or indeed a zero-covid world, and we cannot persist indefinitely with restrictions that debilitate our economy, our physical and mental wellbeing, and the life chances of our children. That is why it is so crucial that this road map should be cautious but also irreversible.

We are now setting out on what I hope and believe is a one-way road to freedom, and this journey is made possible by the pace of the vaccination programme. In England, everyone in the top four priority groups was successfully offered a vaccine by the middle of February. We now aim to offer a first dose to all those in groups five to nine by 15 April, and I am setting another stretching target: to offer a first dose to every adult by the end of July. As more of us are inoculated, so the protection afforded by the vaccines will gradually replace the restrictions, and today's road map sets out the principles of that transition.

The level of infection is broadly similar across England, so we will ease restrictions in all areas at the same time. The sequence will be driven by the evidence, so outdoor activity will be prioritised as the best way to restore freedoms while minimising the risk. At every stage, our decisions will be led by data not dates, and subjected to four tests: first, that the vaccine deployment programme continues successfully; second, that evidence shows vaccines

are sufficiently effective in reducing hospitalisations and deaths; third, that infection rates do not risk a surge in hospitalisations, which would put unsustainable pressure on the NHS; and, fourth, that our assessment of the risks is not fundamentally changed by new variants of covid that cause concern.

Before taking each step, we will review the data against these tests. Because it takes at least four weeks for the data to reflect the impact of relaxations in restrictions, and because we want to give the country a week's notice before each change, there will be at least five weeks between each step. The chief medical officer is clear that moving any faster would mean acting before we know the impact of each step, which would increase the risk of us having to reverse course and reimpose restrictions. I will not take that risk.

Step one will happen from 8 March, by which time those in the top four priority groups will be benefiting from the increased protection they receive from their first dose of the vaccine. All the evidence shows that classrooms are the best places for our young people to be. That is why I have always said that schools would be the last to close and the first to reopen. Based on our assessment of the current data against the four tests, I can tell the House that, two weeks from today, pupils and students in all schools and further education settings can safely return to face-to-face teaching, supported by twice-weekly testing of secondary school and college pupils. Families and childcare bubbles will also be encouraged to get tested regularly. Breakfast and after-school clubs can also reopen, and other children's activities, including sport, can restart where necessary to help parents to work. Students on university courses requiring practical teaching, specialist facilities or on-site assessments will also return, but all others will need to continue learning online, and we will review the options for when they can return by the end of the Easter holidays.

From 8 March, people will also be able to meet one person from outside their household for outdoor recreation, such as a coffee on a bench or a picnic in a park, in addition to exercise, but we are advising the clinically extremely vulnerable to shield at least until the end of March. Every care home resident will be able to nominate a named visitor, able to see them regularly, provided they are tested and wear personal protective equipment. Finally we will amend regulations to enable a broader range of covid-secure campaign activities for local elections on 6 May.

As part of step one, we will go further and make limited changes on 29 March, when schools go on Easter holidays. It will become possible to meet in limited numbers outdoors, where the risk is lower. So the rule of six will return outdoors, including private gardens, and outdoor meetings of two households will also be permitted on the same basis, so that families in different circumstances can meet. Outdoor sports facilities, such as tennis and basketball courts and open-air swimming pools, will be able to reopen, and formally organised outdoor sports will resume, subject to guidance. From this point, 29 March, people will no longer be legally required to stay at home, but many lockdown restrictions will remain. People should continue to work from home where they can and minimise all travel wherever possible.

Step two will begin at least five weeks after the beginning of step one and no earlier than 12 April, with an announcement at least seven days in advance. If analysis

[The Prime Minister]

of the latest data against the four tests requires a delay, then this and subsequent steps will also be delayed, to maintain the five-week gap.

In step two, non-essential retail will reopen, as will personal care, including hairdressers, I am glad to say, and nail salons. Indoor leisure facilities such as gyms will reopen, as will holiday lets, but only for use by individuals or household groups. We will begin to reopen our pubs and restaurants outdoors; hon. Members will be relieved that there will be no curfew, and the Scotch egg debate will be over because there will be no requirement for alcohol to be accompanied by a substantial meal. Zoos, theme parks and drive-in cinemas will reopen, as will public libraries and community centres.

Step three will begin no earlier than 17 May. Provided that the data satisfies the four tests, most restrictions on meetings outdoors will be lifted, subject to a limit of 30, and this is the point when you will be able to see your friends and family indoors, subject to the rule of six or the meeting of two households. We will also reopen pubs and restaurants indoors, along with cinemas and children's play areas, hotels, hostels, and bed and breakfasts. Theatres and concert halls will reopen their doors, and the turnstiles of our sports stadiums will once again rotate, subject in all cases to capacity limits depending on the size of the venue. We will pilot larger events using enhanced testing, with the ambition of further easing restrictions in the next step.

Step four will begin no earlier than 21 June. With appropriate mitigations, we will aim to remove all legal limits on social contact and on weddings and other life events. We will reopen everything up to and including nightclubs, and enable large events such as theatre performances above the limits of step three, potentially using testing to reduce the risk of infection.

Our journey back towards normality will be subject to resolving a number of key questions, and to do this we will conduct four reviews. One will assess how long we need to maintain social distancing and face masks. This will also inform guidance on working from home, which should continue wherever possible until this review is complete, and it will be critical in determining how Parliament can safely return in a way that I know hon. Members would wish.

A second review will consider the resumption of international travel, which is vital for many businesses that have been hardest hit, including retail, hospitality, tourism and aviation. A successor to the global travel taskforce will report by 12 April so that people can plan for the summer. The third review will consider the potential role of covid status certification in helping venues to open safely, but be mindful of the many concerns surrounding exclusion, discrimination and privacy. The fourth review will look at the safe return of major events.

As we proceed through these steps, we will benefit from the combined protection of our vaccines and the continued expansion of rapid testing. We will extend the provision of free test kits for workplaces until the end of June, and families, small businesses and the self-employed can collect those tests from local testing sites.

In view of these cautious but, I hope, irreversible changes, people may be concerned about what they mean for the various support packages for livelihoods, for people and for the economy, so I want to assure the House that we

will not pull the rug out. For the duration of the pandemic, the Government will continue to do whatever it takes to protect jobs and livelihoods across the UK, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will set out further details in the Budget next Wednesday.

Finally, we must remain alert to the constant mutations of the virus. Next month we will publish an updated plan for responding to local outbreaks with a range of measures to address variants of concern, including surge PCR testing and enhanced contact tracing. We cannot, I am afraid, rule out reimposing restrictions at local or regional level if evidence suggests that they are necessary to contain or suppress a new variant which escapes the vaccines.

I know there will be many people who will be worried that we are being too ambitious and that it is arrogant to impose any kind of plan upon a virus. I agree that we must always be humble in the face of nature and we must be cautious, but I also believe that the vaccination programme has dramatically changed the odds in our favour, and it is on that basis that we can now proceed.

Of course, there will be others who believe that we could go faster on the basis of the vaccination programme. I understand their feelings, and I sympathise very much with the exhaustion and the stress that people and businesses are experiencing after so long in lockdown. But to them all, I say that today the end really is in sight and a wretched year will give way to a spring and a summer that will be very different and incomparably better than the picture we see around us today. In that spirit, I commend this statement to the House.

3.51 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement and for the telephone call between us earlier today. This is the third time that the Prime Minister has announced a plan to come out of national lockdown. In the past, we have emerged without sufficient caution, without a clear plan and without listening to the science. We cannot afford to make those mistakes again. This has to be the last lockdown. The vaccine roll-out, as the Prime Minister said, has been remarkable, and I pay tribute to everybody involved. It is the light at the end of the tunnel, but if we are going to get there, we have to tread very carefully. I am glad that the Prime Minister spoke today of caution, of this being irreversible, of assessing the data and following the evidence. Those are the right guiding principles—and, I have to say, it is a welcome change from some of the language the Prime Minister used in the past. I urge him now to stick to that.

I turn to the substance of the matter. First, on schools, we all agree that the priority must be for all children to be back in school as quickly as possible and to stay in school. We want that to happen on 8 March, as the Government have promised. The confidence of parents, teachers and school staff will be critical, so will the Prime Minister please confirm that the chief medical officer and the chief scientific adviser support the full reopening of all schools on 8 March? Will he commit to publishing all the relevant medical evidence on this issue?

Will the Prime Minister also indicate what the Government are doing to overcome the huge logistical challenges this presents? He touched on mass testing in his statement, but there was nothing on Nightingale classrooms and extra capacity, which is a huge problem,

particularly for schools with smaller buildings. Will the Prime Minister update the House on how he will deal with that in just over two weeks' time?

Let me turn to a linked issue. Within weeks of schools returning last autumn, thousands of teachers and school staff were self-isolating, causing huge disruption to the running of schools and children's learning. We do not want that again. That is why Labour called for the early vaccination of all teachers and school staff. In my own constituency, the fantastic Francis Crick Institute, which has been doing amazing work, has been vaccinating hundreds of people a day. The institute has been very clear to me—and publicly—that it could be doing more, and it is obvious to me that over one weekend it could have vaccinated all teachers and school staff in Camden if it had been allowed to do so, without bumping anyone else from the priority list. There are similar examples across the country. Will the Prime Minister see what more can be done to speed up the vaccination of teachers and school staff to ensure that children and young people not only return to school on 8 March, but stay in school having returned?

Let me turn to isolation support. As we release health measures, however gradually, there is a risk that infection rates will go up; the Prime Minister made that clear in his statement. It is therefore more important than ever that test, trace and isolate is working and working well. One of the most concerning figures in a recent SAGE report is that only three in 10 people who should be self-isolating are actually doing so. It is obvious that one of the main drivers of this is insecurity at work. As the chair of Test and Trace has said, people are "scared" to take the test because they cannot afford to self-isolate. That not only harms our health response, but it costs the economy too—and it has to be fixed. We have proposed that the £500 isolation payment, which is currently only available to one in eight workers, be made available to everyone who needs it. Will the Prime Minister consider that? If we do not shift the three in 10 figure, there will be a huge hole in our defences.

I turn to economic support. The Prime Minister announced a road map today, but it will not have escaped businesses that many of them will not be able to open until mid-April at the earliest, and many not until mid-June. I am not questioning the health basis for that decision, which I support, but I am reiterating what we have always said—that health restrictions must be accompanied by proper economic support. It makes no sense to announce today that businesses will be closed for many more weeks or months without announcing new economic support at the same time. The Prime Minister says, "Well, the Budget will be next week", but there is nothing stopping him saying today that business rates relief will be extended, that furlough will be extended, or that the VAT cut for hospitality and leisure will be extended. Businesses are crying out for that certainty and the Prime Minister should give it to them today.

The Prime Minister should also announce proper support for the 3 million self-employed who have been left out of all support for the last year. I was asked about this issue again on LBC this morning, by a self-employed businesswoman who is at her wits' end at the lack of Government support. This road map means that she may not be able to get her business up and running again until mid-June. Surely the Prime Minister needs to act now to close the gap for those 3 million people.

We support the twin principles that the Prime Minister has set out today—that the lifting of restrictions must be both cautious and irreversible. But I know that the Prime Minister will come under pressure from those on his own Benches to go faster and throw caution to the wind. Last week, it was reported that around 60 of his own Members of Parliament called for the end of all restrictions by the end of April, and I am sure that there are going to be similar calls this afternoon. I hope that the Prime Minister takes the opportunity to face this down because if the road map is to work, he needs to listen to the chief scientific adviser and the chief medical officer, not to the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) or the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper). If the Prime Minister does that, he will have our support and will secure a majority in the House. If he does not, we will waste all the sacrifices of the last 12 months.

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his overall support for the road map. Indeed, I also welcome his support for the vaccine roll-out. I am sure that many people will be glad to hear what he says. I cannot help but remind you, Mr Speaker, that he did vote to stay in the European Medicines Agency, which would have made a vaccine roll-out of this speed impossible.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to say that it is a priority to get schools back safely. I am delighted that he agrees with that. I can certainly say that that plan for all schools to go back on 8 March is supported by the chief medical officer and the chief scientific adviser. It would be a good thing if he could perhaps persuade some of his friends in the unions to say so as well and to say that schools are safe.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman mentioned the importance of self-isolation. We will continue to support those who are asked to self-isolate and, indeed, increase our package of support for them. As for the support for business and for the self-employed, which he rightly raised, we will continue to put our arms around businesses and livelihoods around the country, as we have done throughout the pandemic, and the Chancellor, who has been extremely creative in this respect, will be setting out the details in the Budget next week, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman would expect. Overall, I think we can safely say that we have had cautious support from the Leader of the Opposition today, but bitter experience has taught me that his support is very far from irreversible. Who knows what he will be saying next week, but I am glad of it today.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. May I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement today? I particularly welcome the return to school on 8 March, but there is another sector that is important for jobs in my constituency, fundamental to our economy and critical to global Britain—the aviation sector. He says that there will be a taskforce report by 12 April so that people can plan for the summer, but that will not allow people to plan. At every stage, the Government have taken weeks, following these reports, to provide certainty to the industry. The industry needs three months' preparation from the point of certainty, so I ask him to look again at the timetable for the taskforce report and to bring it forward so that we can open up our international air travel and ensure that Britain is open for business.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. She is quite rightly a doughty campaigner for the aviation industry and all that it brings to our country. I can tell her that we will continue to support that industry throughout these difficult times, but I believe that setting a deadline of 12 April for the report of the newly formed, reconstituted travel taskforce will give people time to make their plans for the summer. If things go well, and if we can meet these “not before” dates, I believe there is every chance of an aviation recovery later this year.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: The success of the vaccine roll-out, led by our incredible NHS staff, is something to behold and something that we are all thankful for. For the first time in many months, people across these islands are genuinely hopeful that an end to the current lockdown is finally in sight, but people also know that one major threat could undo much of that hope. The spread of new international variants of the virus now poses the single biggest threat to finally getting out of the pandemic. That is why quarantine measures for international arrivals are so important. We simply cannot afford to get this wrong. That is why the Scottish Government have taken tough but absolutely necessary action. Those arriving in Scotland on an international flight have to quarantine in a hotel for 10 days. In England, though, the policy applies only to people travelling from red list countries.

The evidence shows that people across the United Kingdom are demanding stronger measures to prevent the spread of any new variant. YouGov polling last week showed that only 18% support the UK Government's rules on quarantine, while a massive 72% of people across the United Kingdom prefer the Scottish Government's comprehensive approach. Prime Minister, your plan to end lockdown will be worthless if your insufficient quarantine measures allow a new variant in through the back door. People right across the United Kingdom are continuing to make huge sacrifices: children are not yet physically at school, families are isolated and there is a loneliness epidemic. People are really struggling, and all this cannot be for nothing. Do not leave the back door open. Do not risk all the hard work and all the sacrifices that have been made.

Given all that is at stake, can the Prime Minister explain why the UK Government are failing to introduce the strong quarantine measures that the public across the United Kingdom are demanding? Will he think again and introduce the Scottish Government's comprehensive approach for international travellers? Let us all do what we need to do to drive down the spread of the virus and get us all into a position where we can reverse lockdown and begin to restore social interaction for all our wellbeing.

The Prime Minister: We have among the toughest quarantine measures anywhere in the world, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows, including the mandatory incarceration in hotels appointed by the Government if people return from one of the 33 red list countries. We will continue to impose very, very tough controls on people coming into this country. He should also know that we are confident that all our vaccines are effective in reducing death and serious disease, and we have no reason to doubt that they are effective in reducing death and serious disease from the new variants as well. He should also know that over the course of the next few

months we will see new vaccines to defeat these vaccine-escaping variants and that is evolving the whole time. Other than that, I was delighted by the unaccustomed note of optimism with which he began. He is not often notable for his optimism in this House. He is rolling his eyes, but I rather liked it when he began with optimism. I think he should stick to it; I think it suits him. More optimism from him would be nice to hear.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con) [V]: Talking of optimism, the Prime Minister's approach feels similar to that of Harold Wilson, who said he was an optimist but one who always carried a raincoat. The Prime Minister's caution is absolutely right in the face of these new variants, when we are potentially so close to the finishing line. But as we get there, will he recognise the brilliant work of our health and care staff by building back better for them, potentially in next week's Budget, by announcing that we will finally make sure we are training enough doctors and nurses with a long-term workforce plan and by giving the social care sector a 10-year plan, just as we gave the NHS one 10 years ago?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. I pay tribute again, as I have many times before, to the incredible work of not just our NHS staff, but our social care staff, who have really borne the brunt of the pandemic and have done fantastically well. We will certainly be bringing forward reforms of social care, in addition to the massive investments we have already made.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD) [V]: The road map to recovery must put people hit hardest by this pandemic first, not least people with learning disabilities. They have died at rates that are more than three and half times those for the rest of the population, yet many are still not being prioritised for vaccination. Jo Whiley has spoken powerfully about how “hideously unfair” it was to be offered the vaccine before her sister Frances, who is now in hospital with covid after an outbreak in her care home. I know that many other carers across the country feel the same while our loved ones remain so vulnerable to this virus. So will the Prime Minister tell us when, on his road map, everyone with a learning disability will have been offered their first jab?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely right to draw attention to the particular suffering endured by vulnerable groups throughout this pandemic. That is why those with learning difficulties, those with particular vulnerabilities, do appear high up in the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation priority list, which I am sure is exactly what he would expect.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) [V]: First, can I congratulate the Prime Minister on his incredibly bold decision last year? It is due to that and getting the vaccines roll-out going that we are now looking at the eventual end to this covid nightmare, so he deserves all the plaudits he gets for that and more. I agree with his caution in this roll-out and going back to being unlocked, but I just say to him that the hospitality sector is a very big employer of the poorest in society and it is they who have suffered the most in terms of incomes. Nearly half of those businesses are talking about closing, so I wonder whether he would feel it possible to review again the nature of opening up inside those restaurants and pubs, to check that there is

no real risk beyond that for any of the other elements he is opening up and, if that is the case, to take that bold decision as and when the data dictates it?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for what he said just now. I totally understand where he is coming from and the urgency of those in the hospitality sector who want to open up as soon as possible, as indeed we all do. Everybody in this House wants that to happen, but we also understand the risk of another surge and the consequent risk of a fourth lockdown, which I do not think anybody wants to see, least of all the businesses concerned. What we have in this road map are dates—admittedly, they are “not before” dates—to which businesses can now work: 12 April for outdoor hospitality, 17 May for indoor hospitality. That gives at least some certainty. I think, in this very, very difficult time, with these difficult trade-offs, people would be prepared to trade some urgency and some haste for more certainty and more reliability, and that is what we aim to give.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: Diolch yn fawr, Mr Llefarydd. Workers across the UK still face a hopeless choice: self-isolating and suffering a loss of earnings, or going to work, where they risk spreading the virus. Eight months ago, I raised the very problem of the UK’s unfit sick pay system with the Prime Minister, but there are still people in work who cannot afford to self-isolate. Ahead of the Budget, will the Prime Minister commit to raising and expanding statutory sick pay once and for all as a key long-term lesson to be learned from this pandemic, or is he content for our poorest communities to be blighted by ill health now and quite possibly again in future?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady and repeat the point that I have made to her many times before, although I am grateful to her for raising this again: we will continue to look after people throughout the pandemic. We have increased benefits. There is the payment of £500 and other payments that we will make available. Our undertaking is to make sure that we protect people, whether they are self-isolating or are forced not to be able to work throughout the duration of the pandemic, and she will be hearing more about that from the Chancellor on 3 March.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thankfully, my right hon. Friend has clearly stated today that an extreme zero-covid approach is impracticable. Can he confirm that most, if not all, of his key scientific advisers now accept that our strategic goal must be and is a practical, vaccine-based method of controlling covid like any other serious respiratory virus, such as influenza?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is completely right in the analogy he draws. The only reason I am able to say to the country that we must learn to live with covid as we live with flu in the long term is, of course, because we have this vaccination programme and the capability to evolve our vaccines.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: As well as welcoming the success of the vaccination programme, I want to emphasise that there is a lack of sufficient financial support for self-isolation. There is, in the words of one of the Government’s own advisers, a “huge gaping hole” in the Prime Minister’s covid strategy. The payments are not enough and they are not reaching

the right people. So as well as fixing that once and for all, will he also take this opportunity to respond, with the seriousness it deserves, to the High Court’s ruling on Friday that the Secretary of State acted unlawfully by failing to publish covid contracts? No one has ever suggested that Ministers did not need to act fast to procure PPE and other covid-related contracts, but transparency matters, even in a crisis, so if the Government have nothing to hide, will the Prime Minister now publish details of who benefited from the VIP lane, who lifted the velvet ropes for those favoured companies, what price they were paid and why they were chosen? Parliament and the country have a right to know.

The Prime Minister: Of course, we will continue to look after those who are self-isolating and improve their support where we can, as I have said. As for the contracts that the hon. Lady just mentioned, all the details are on the record, and of course it was right to work as fast as we possibly could to get the PPE that this country so desperately needed.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con) [V]: I thank the medics and the volunteers who have worked so hard in providing covid-19 vaccines across the kingdom. In the Wakefield clinical commissioning group area alone, more than 87,000 vaccines have been administered. The vaccine roll-out is the fundamental route out for us, ensuring that we are able to return to our much lamented normality and properly follow the pathway that has just been outlined by the Prime Minister. I am concerned that vaccine disinformation has specifically targeted ethnic minority groups, leading to some refusing the vaccine when they are offered it. Can my right hon. Friend outline what steps the Government are taking to encourage black, Asian and minority ethnic groups to receive the vaccine when they are offered it?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and congratulate him on the spectacular throne on which he appears to be sitting. Not so long ago, he and I were together in the Al-Hikmah community centre in Batley. I thank all those involved in this roll-out, including the community groups up and down the land that are doing an outstanding job in promulgating vaccinations. He raises a very important point, and I thank him for what he is doing to promote vaccinations for everybody.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) [V]: My constituents are seeking explanations. Most of them have lost income, many have lost their jobs and all are facing varying degrees of stress, ranging from the very severe to concern about their lives. Many local small businesses have closed for good because they see no future and they are not getting the support that they need. Yet, Mr Speaker, answers are required from the Prime Minister: how £10.5 billion of NHS contracts were awarded without tender; how a further 99% of all NHS contracts were awarded, again, without tender; and how, last week, the High Court found that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care had not acted legally in the awarding of those contracts. I ask the Prime Minister to do two things: will he end this scandalous privatisation of our NHS, which is happening before our very eyes; and will he replace the Health Secretary with somebody who will stand by and obey the law and publish in advance all contracts that are due to be let, so that the public can see how their money is being spent?

The Prime Minister: To the best of my memory, the Labour Opposition were advocating during the early stages of the crisis that we should secure PPE from, I think, a theatrical impresario who specialised in capes and gowns and a football agent who claimed to be able to get hold of masks. We went as fast as we possibly could to get PPE and those who are now denouncing us for going too fast were those who were complaining back then that we were not going fast enough.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend and the Government have rightly been unapologetic throughout this pandemic in their determination to safeguard children's educational opportunities and wellbeing. Can the Prime Minister confirm that, once all schools reopen on 8 March, the Government will be putting in place all the measures necessary to keep them open, working with academy trusts and, crucially, local authorities to avoid any further disruption to our children's education?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. I am grateful to my hon. Friend because that is exactly why we wish to take this cautious but irreversible approach to make sure that we do not have to go back into measures that would keep kids out of school again. He is quite right in what he says.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: I welcome the progressive road map of the Prime Minister and the Government, which, of course, is underpinned by the incredibly successful roll-out of the vaccine. Can the Prime Minister confirm that we have no supply issues and are on target to give the second dose to all of those on the NHS frontline who are due them in the next few weeks? Can he also assure us that this will not adversely affect the continuous supply and availability of first vaccines for the informal carers of those who are shielding?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is completely right to raise this and to care deeply about supply. We have no supply issues at the moment, and we are confident that we can meet our targets.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) [V]: I congratulate the Prime Minister on the fact that sunlit uplands now beckon us. He is right to say that the threat remains substantial, because while we are unlocking, at this stage only a third of the adult population has been vaccinated. What will the Government do to minimise the threat of another lockdown—for example, by strengthening the track, trace and isolate operation, particularly at a local level; providing covid-safe spaces, so that it is easier for people who are infected to self-isolate; and deploying testing capacity more effectively, such as testing schoolchildren twice a week in schools, as we will already be testing teachers?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in the ideas that he puts forward. Test, track and trace has been improving the whole time over the period of the pandemic. He is right to draw attention to the potential of lateral flow testing, not just in schools—as he says, we will be doing it twice a week for secondary school pupils after the first couple of weeks—but rolling it out for companies and local communities to take up as an additional support and an additional way of fighting the disease.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab) [V]: I know that the Prime Minister was in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) last week to see the vaccine programme being rolled out by the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board at Cwmbran Stadium. I join him in thanking all the Welsh NHS staff and volunteers who are working so hard to save lives by rolling out the vaccine programme. However, does he agree with me and many people across Newport West that every single penny of public money must be accounted for? If so, what is he going to say to his Health Secretary, who, according to the High Court, breached his legal obligation by not publishing details within 30 days of contracts being signed? We have had two attempts at getting the Prime Minister to answer, so I am hoping it is third time lucky.

The Prime Minister: I am going to ruthlessly repeat what I said before, which is that I believe that it was absolutely right for this country to secure PPE as fast as we possibly could, just as it has been right to roll out a vaccine programme as fast as we possibly can. It was great to be in Cwmbran and see what they are doing there. That is thanks to the dynamic work of the NHS and everybody in the Department of Health and Social Care, including the Health Secretary.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con) [V]: Today I hosted a Zoom meeting between Bolton North East's pubs and restaurants and the Minister for Small Business, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). Can the Prime Minister ensure that we allow businesses enough time to improve our hospitality's operating data and make the dates in 2021 utterly delectable?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for what he is doing to help local businesses and rally them. If we can stick to this road map—and I believe that we can—there is not long to go now for those businesses. For hospitality in Bolton, there are two dates: there is outdoor hospitality on 12 April and then indoor, with all its potential, on 17 May. That gives some dates for us all to think about and for business to work towards, and I hope that it will be of some reassurance to them.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Some eminent members of SAGE have indicated that they are concerned about a resurgence with the return of children to schools. Can the Prime Minister say whether the chief medical officer and the chief scientific adviser support reopening schools in their entirety on 8 March? During the last term, many schools suffered an enormous amount of disruption because staff were off isolating. Is not the best way to prevent that from happening in the future to ensure that all school staff are vaccinated?

The Prime Minister: I have a deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman as he and I have clashed many times over issues in London, but I think he uncommonly showed a failure to follow what I had already said in my answer to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer): the CMO and the CSA both approve of reopening in full.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con) [V]: More than anything, the nation's businesses need certainty in order to plan. Today's road map provides that

certainty, and the reopening of schools is a welcome and critical element of it. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is important that, like navigating lock gates on a canal, we now proceed sequentially, as fast as possible, but always in a forward direction?

The Prime Minister: As anybody who has steered a narrowboat or barge on a canal will know, the important thing is not to oversteer and then be forced to correct and bump the sides of the canal. That is what we are trying to avoid, which is why we are embarking on a cautious but irreversible approach.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: I will leave it to another time to ask the Prime Minister why we did not have adequate PPE stocks given the fact that Exercise Cygnus in 2016 stipulated that we needed to increase our PPE stockpiles.

I was really concerned about the tone of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care when he did the media round yesterday: he seemed to imply that he had done nothing wrong and that the judge was the one making a mistake. This is not how a healthy democracy works, so I repeat the questions asked by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas): will the Prime Minister publish all outstanding contracts, because there are outstanding contracts that have not been published; bring an end to the emergency procurement powers; and reintroduce a tendering process?

The Prime Minister: I can see that there is a concerted attempt to make a point about this issue today, but I must say that the Government made every effort to secure PPE as fast as we possibly could, and I think that is what the people of this country wanted. We ended up with 32 billion items of PPE and, thanks to Lord Deighton, the PPE taskforce and others, we now have the capability, which I think will reassure the hon. Lady's constituents more than anything else, to make 70% of our PPE needs in this country.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con) [V]: It is brilliant news that we have now vaccinated one in three adults in the UK—it is a huge testament to British science; to the NHS; to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) and his whole team; and to everybody involved in the vaccination programme, not least my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. Does the Prime Minister agree that because of his swift roll-out of the vaccine programme, we are now in a much stronger position to start to ease restrictions and put ourselves back on the path to some form of normality much sooner than we would have been able to without a vaccination roll-out programme?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course. My hon. Friend is completely right and I thank him very much for what he just said. The only reason why this road map is possible—we are one of a tiny number of countries around the world that have been able to set out a road map with dates and milestones this far ahead—is the vaccination roll-out programme.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab) [V]: The people of this country have endured so much in the past year, including personal tragedies among the highest excess death toll and job losses under the worst

damage to any major economy. But they have also seen the Prime Minister's closest adviser, Dominic Cummings, break the covid regulations, the Home Secretary break the ministerial code and now the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care break the law to hide crony contracts—all without consequences. Will the Prime Minister end this system of one rule for his Tory pals and another for the rest of us?

The Prime Minister: Contained within that question was possibly another suggestion that we could have done things differently with the procurement of PPE. All I will say is that the contracts are there on the record for everybody to see. I think most people in this country will understand that in very difficult if not desperate times last spring, we had to work as fast as we possibly could.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, especially the announcement on schools. He is right to be driven by the evidence. Last week, Professor Mark Woolhouse told the Science and Technology Committee that during the whole year "there has been very, very little evidence of any transmission outdoors happening in the UK."

Will my right hon. Friend continue to look at the evidence and see whether it is possible to bring back outdoor activities such as sports during the weeks ahead? With the spring weather coming, that would be a great boon to millions of people throughout the country.

The Prime Minister: Of course my right hon. Friend is right to raise the point about outdoor transmission. That is why, on 8 March, with the return of schools, we are also going to be seeing school sport, which is great, plus outdoor recreation one on one in the way that I described earlier on, and then on 29 March it is the rule of six plus two households together, plus more sport outdoors of all kinds, up to and including, I think, rugby with tackling but without the scrums, as I understand the guidance.

Mr Speaker: Welcome to rugby league!

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP) [V]: Analysis by the Royal College of General Practitioners of NHS England's covid-19 vaccination figures shows that people of black ethnicity are half as likely as people of white ethnicity to get vaccinated and people of Asian ethnicity are under two thirds as likely as their white counterparts to accept vaccination. What additional specific steps will the Prime Minister take to encourage greater uptake of the vaccine in those communities?

The Prime Minister: The number of people receiving the vaccine is actually increasing in all communities on roughly the same gradient, but the hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise the concern that I think everybody has about uptake in some communities. It is now going faster. We have rolled out a network of community champions. I think we have put about £23 million into supporting community champions for hard-to-reach, vaccine-resistant communities. The most important thing is for everybody to get across the message that the vaccine is a wonderful thing and everybody should get it: "Get your vaccine when you get your message from the NHS."

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): I welcome very strongly the reopening of schools. After what we have put them through over the past year, it is time we prioritised the interests of our children and young people. The Prime Minister sets out a programme based on data, not dates, and that must be right, but will he please publish the precise criteria for each of those stages to be met? Finally, when the renewal of emergency powers is due, will he undertake to bring that vote to the House before the Easter recess and not after?

The Prime Minister: Yes indeed: there is going to be a massive data dump—I think that is the word I have been quoted today. Some colleagues may already have seen some of the data that is available, underpinning the road map that we have set out. There will of course be another vote in this House about these measures before Easter, and then those measures, in turn, elapse on 21 June in the way that I have described.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: Local council public health teams will continue to be pivotal in controlling the virus, but the Government's decade of austerity and cuts has damaged their capacity, and the public health grant last year—2020-21—was 22% lower per head in real terms compared with 2015-16. Will the Prime Minister tell the House when the public health grant allocation for this year will be announced and whether it will include a significant real-terms increase to ensure that councils can continue to keep our communities safe?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to councils, and particularly public health officials, for the incredible work that they have done in the past year—the absolutely amazing work that they have done. We are supporting them with another £4.7 billion, as the hon. Lady knows, to support local councils in everything they do, and we will continue to offer support throughout the pandemic.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con) [V]: I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and for the precautionary approach that he is pursuing to lifting the lockdown. It is clear that the impact of covid will be with us for some time, and I would thus be most grateful if he could confirm that this plan is co-ordinated and synchronised with the measures that the Chancellor will announce in the Budget, and that there will be ongoing support both for badly affected businesses in sectors such as hospitality and for those people who are relying on the £20 uplift to universal credit.

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course we will make sure that we continue to look after people throughout the pandemic, as we have done since the beginning. The Chancellor will be setting out next week exactly what we are doing.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: Greater Manchester has been under local restrictions since the end of July, and it has been a long few months, so I welcome the road map out of lockdown and also the success of the vaccine. As somebody who has just about shaken off long covid symptoms 11 months after contracting covid, can I urge the Prime Minister not to forget those still struggling and the many more who will develop long covid as a consequence of the latest wave of the virus? As the economy switches back on and as lives return to normal, will he also commit to doing

more for those who still do not have access to long covid clinics and who still do not have access to support or help, so that nobody is left behind?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted to see the hon. Gentleman back on fighting form. Having enjoyed lively on-screen debates with him in the past, it is good to see him back in shape. He is right to draw attention to the long-term consequences of the disease, and we will do everything we can to alleviate suffering and to continue to invest in support for those who need it.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): First, I thank the Prime Minister for the measures to get our children back to school on 8 March, which is very welcome—it is something we have called for, and I think he should be congratulated on that—and also for the speed of the vaccine roll-out. Could I just press him a little on the thoughts behind vaccinating groups 1 to 9, which is everyone over 50 and those aged 16 to 64 with a health condition that makes them vulnerable to covid? Those groups account for 99% of deaths and around 80% of hospitalisations, so for what reason, once they have been vaccinated and protected from covid by the end of April at the latest, is there any need for restrictions to continue?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The difficulty is that, of course, there will be at least a significant minority who either have not taken up the vaccine in those vulnerable groups for the reasons that the House has been discussing or who, having had the vaccine, are not given sufficient protection. We believe that the protection is very substantial, but there will be a large minority who will not have sufficient protection. The risk is that letting the brakes off could see the disease surge up in such a way as again to rip through a large number or rip through those groups in a way that I do not think anybody in this country would want. I am afraid it is pure mathematics; there is still a substantial body of risk. We also need to wait and see exactly what the effects of the vaccine are. There is some promising data, but I think what the country would want at this stage is caution and certainty and irreversibility, and that is what we aim to provide.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: Throughout this crisis, the Government have been slow to offer the financial support that people need. From 3 million people excluded from any support, to thousands of people failing to self-isolate because they cannot afford to miss work, it is clear that we need to do more. Will the Prime Minister confirm that, to get through the next few months, the Budget will bring forward adequate financial support for everyone who cannot work due to the pandemic, including those who are self-isolating, rather than the current system, which sees too many people fall through the cracks?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I certainly can confirm that, and the hon. Member should wait to see what the Chancellor has to say next week. I think colleagues on all sides of the House would concede that the programmes of support that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has brought forward have been extremely effective and generous by virtually all international comparisons.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. Those of us who represent constituencies where retail, hospitality and tourism are an absolute lifeblood will welcome the dates and the fact that domestic holidays in England are open as normal for the summer, but may I ask the Prime Minister to give a little more detail on the global travel taskforce, which reports by 12 April? Will it set out the requirements regarding testing, vaccination certificates, social distancing and face masks and, I hope, measures towards an end to quarantine?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. The travel taskforce will be looking at all those things—quarantine, destinations and so on and so forth. I think at the moment one consideration is that we need to make sure that there are countries that will be willing to accept British tourists in the way that we would like to see. Some of them have stepped forward and said that they will, but they are currently not very numerous.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) [V]: Lateral flow testing is central to the Prime Minister's educational reopening plans, so can he explain why our only real-world published figures—from the student asymptomatic testing programme in Scotland before Christmas—showed that almost 30% of positive tests turned out to be false when subject to a confirmatory polymerase chain reaction test? Considering the financial, educational and mental health impact of self-isolation, does the Prime Minister share my concerns that a lot of students will be told to self-isolate for no reason?

The Prime Minister: I do not recognise that figure. Lateral flow tests are extremely valuable in isolating asymptomatic positive tests and in helping schools to restart. That is why we are pursuing them.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con) [V]: I welcome the statement today and the prudent and cautious measures to reducing lockdown restrictions. We have all had our role to play in combating the virus, and it is a role that will continue for some time, so will the Prime Minister join me in saying thank you to all my constituents in Stourbridge for their continued patience and resilience, whether that is the fabulous Dudley NHS, my care homes, Mary Stevens Hospice, all those unsung heroes, my teaching fraternity, the army of vaccinators, all key workers and those essential workers who have kept us fed and watered—truly heroic efforts by one and all?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her brilliant question. I plant my flag firmly on everything she has just said and echo it sincerely. I add my thanks not just to the people of Stourbridge for their patience and resilience, but to the people of the entire country.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) [V]: Too often, children and young people have been an afterthought during this pandemic. Aside from lost learning, many children are feeling anxious and lonely due to not seeing their friends and missing out on play and other activities. We know that one in four has self-harmed in the past year, that eating disorder rates are soaring and that demand for acute beds is reaching crisis point, so will the Prime Minister please commit to providing a ring-fenced resilience fund for schools, as proposed by YoungMinds, to ensure that young people are given the mental health support they so desperately need?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to draw attention to endurance and the things we have asked young people to put up with this year and over the past 12 months. There cannot be a generation like it, who have experienced so much disruption to their education. She is right to call attention to the pressures and stress that that has caused. We have invested massively in mental health provision, particularly for young people's mental health. One of the things we have done is appoint a young people's mental health ambassador in the form of Alex George, but the top priority for the Government is now not just to get kids back in school on 8 March, but to make sure that we remediate their education with a programme of much more than £1 billion. The Secretary of State for Education will be setting out more about our plans to help those pupils later this week.

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con) [V]: The people of this country are desperate to be set free as soon as possible. As my right hon. Friend knows, many of the tourism and hospitality businesses in Derbyshire Dales have been hit heavily by this pandemic, so please will he encourage the country to book self-catered, self-contained accommodation for staycation holidays in places like Derbyshire Dales this summer, where families are able to minimise mixing with other people but have some fun?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is completely right, and, as she will have heard just now, the option to book a staycation is, all being well, now there for 12 April, and I cannot imagine there are many lovelier destinations around then than the Derbyshire dales.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP) [V]: Following the High Court ruling that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care acted unlawfully by failing to comply with the transparency rules, will the Prime Minister now publish the names of the companies awarded contracts that were introduced to high-priority lanes by Ministers, hon. Members, peers and officials, and set out any material, financial or fiduciary responsibility or relationship between each company and the persons responsible for that introduction to the priority lane?

The Prime Minister: I repeat the answer I have given several times: all these contracts are published in the normal way.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, and we all recognise the huge work that has been done to make the vaccine roll-out a success, but may I press him on why some of the dates are set as "no earlier than"? If we believe in the vaccine, the programme and the data, is not the logic that if the data shows we can move to free up sectors of the economy sooner, we should not artificially hold them back? Surely that is following the data. Should there not be a little more flexibility there?

The Prime Minister: We need to see the data and the effect of each successive relaxation. As I explained to the House, we need four weeks to assess whether the relaxation has caused a surge in the virus, because that is the time it takes—so, from the opening of schools until 12 April. We will need to assess that, and then we will need a further week to give people due notice, and the same onwards through 17 May to 21 June and so on.

[*The Prime Minister*]

The reason for that cautious but irreversible approach is that I think people would rather have certainty than urgency. We are going as fast as we reasonably and responsibly can, but if there is a trade-off between haste and certainty, I think people would prefer certainty.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Prime Minister will appreciate that parts of my constituency and others in West Yorkshire have been in heightened restrictions and higher tiers since last summer when others had many more freedoms. Our people and businesses have paid a disproportionately high price in the national effort to tackle covid, and because of this many areas are building back from a more challenging position. Can the Prime Minister confirm today that funding packages will address this specific inequality and that there will be no return to regional tiers, ensuring that our recovery from covid is truly a national recovery?

The Prime Minister: Yes, the hon. Lady should wait to hear what the Chancellor says next week, and we will make sure we go forward as one nation together.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): May I congratulate all the staff and volunteers, particularly at the Bosden Moor surgery in Offerton in my constituency, where I had the privilege of joining them as a marshal for the car park on Friday afternoon as they administered over 500 vaccines? My right hon. Friend says he is led by the data, not the dates, yet his statement outlines many dates, so will he commit to publishing the thresholds of data that will determine the easing of lockdown measures?

The Prime Minister: Yes indeed, my hon. Friend can examine all the data that we have published today. I have set out the criteria by which we will proceed, and I thank him for what he is doing to marshal people in the car parks.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: On 18 February, the UK Government announced £18.5 million for four research projects to better understand the causes, symptoms and treatment of long covid. However, the linkage between sepsis and covid, and between long sepsis and long covid, as evidenced by the UK Sepsis Trust, was not mentioned. Will the Prime Minister please outline his plans to make sure that this very important linkage is included in those research projects?

The Prime Minister: Of course we will look at sepsis, which is a deeply distressing condition, and at whether it has any association with covid.

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) [V]: I thank the Prime Minister for setting out these measures today. I know that everyone is keen to start socialising in a safe way as soon as possible, so will the Prime Minister allow pubs to reopen their gardens as quickly as possible? If six people can buy alcoholic drinks from a shop and meet in a park, I hope that pubs will be given a chance to provide a takeaway service to allow consumption in their gardens as soon as possible.

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. That is why 12 April is the date.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Last month was the worst on record for new aircraft orders, and the aerospace sector, which is so important to my constituency, will suffer a long time after these restrictions are lifted, along with tourism, travel and aviation, as we have heard. Will the Prime Minister therefore commit to continuing support for those areas of the economy, which drive so much of the value of the economy, but which will suffer from a much longer lag before they are able to pick up again?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. That is why we have done everything we can through Time to Pay and other means to try to look after the aviation sector, although it has been incredibly hard for that sector, which matters a great deal to our country. The best way forward for it is to get people flying again. As I said, it is a bit of a time to wait, but the travel taskforce will be reporting on 12 April, and I am hopeful that we will be able to make progress this summer, but we will have to wait and see.

Bill Wiggan (North Herefordshire) (Con) [V]: As an animal welfare champion, I was delighted to hear the Prime Minister mention zoos, but in terms of being able to get out there and visit these places and go to pubs, he described certainty as more important than urgency, and mentioned his concern for the unprotected, unvaccinated element of the population, who could be holding the rest of us back. What more can we do to encourage people who might not have taken up the vaccine to make sure that they get jabbed and let the rest of us out?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we must encourage everybody to take the vaccine, which is a wonderful thing. One of the problems is that, at the moment, we are not, as my hon. Friend knows, vaccinating children—children are not approved for the vaccine, although they are possible vectors of the disease. As he knows, there are also people who are vulnerable to the disease, even though they may have been vaccinated—there will be at least a percentage—so we have to make sure we proceed with caution and in a way that means we do not have to go back.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) [V]: Do the Prime Minister and his Government intend to do anything at all for the 3 million or so people who have been excluded from financial support since the start of this pandemic?

The Prime Minister: We have provided about £15 billion for the self-employed and will continue to look after them in any way we can.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Prime Minister setting out the road map as promised, and it is great that schools will be returning, including, importantly, with their sporting activities. However, with that in mind, 8 March would also have been the optimal time to reintroduce for everyone non-contact sports such as golf, which it is scientifically proven can be participated in safely during the pandemic. Will the Prime Minister set out why it has not been possible to reintroduce those sports at this stage, given that that

will leave millions of people having to wait for another five weeks before they can return to their favourite form of exercise?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is quite right to vent his frustration. I share his frustration; as somebody who yearns to go out and play sport myself, I understand completely how he feels. We must face the fact that, by comparison with any period last year, the virus remains very prevalent in our country, and we have to continue to keep it under control. What we are trying to do is a cautious but irreversible approach, and he only has to wait for another three weeks beyond 8 March to be able to hit a golf ball with a friend.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab) [V]: The Prime Minister's handling of this pandemic has been marked by false promises and inconsistent messaging. Hospitality was covid-secure, yet it had an arbitrary curfew imposed on it and it was then closed down. Today, that industry, which is the lifeblood of coastal tourist towns such as mine, has heard that people can meet outside in a park, yet outdoor areas of safe, regulated pubs, bars and restaurants cannot open until April. I simply cannot see the logic behind that. Can the Prime Minister explain where he found it?

The Prime Minister: The logic lies in containing a pandemic, and I think people in this country understand that. I deeply sympathise with the businesses in the hon. Lady's constituency. The wonderful hospitality sector across the country now has a date to work for—to look forward to—for outdoor hospitality and for indoor hospitality, and I think people would rather have certainty than anything else.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con) [V]: Further to my question to the Prime Minister on 27 January and representations from Medway MPs, Medway will now have a mass vaccination centre, and I thank the Prime Minister and the Government for that. The impact of covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of young people has been raised with me repeatedly by local schools and the local university. The Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield, has suggested that all schools should have a dedicated mental health worker. Is that something that the Government will look to take forward, or will there be specific alternative support for young people? With that, I thank the Prime Minister for his recent response to me with regard to the report that I sent him from Professor Young at King's College London on mental health and covid-19.

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend and the people of Rainham on the vaccine centre and everything that they are doing. He is completely right to raise mental health. That is why we are investing massively in supporting children's and adult mental health, and I recently appointed Alex George to be mental health ambassador for young people.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): As the Prime Minister charts his road map out of this third national lockdown, he has undoubtedly presided over a disastrous response to the pandemic—one of the worst in the world. The sluggishness, double-mindedness and mixed messaging has led to billions of pounds of taxpayers'

money going into crony contracts with firms with links to the Tory party. We have one of the worst economic crises of any major economy in the world, and we have the worst death toll in Europe: more than 100,000 people have died, including members of my family. Would the Prime Minister like to take this opportunity to apologise to the British people and reassure them that the steps he is now taking will not lead us into yet another lockdown?

The Prime Minister: The purpose of this road map is to be cautious but irreversible, and if I take it from what the hon. Gentleman has just said that he supports the road map, then I am glad to have his support.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con) [V]: I fully support my right hon. Friend's cautious approach. However, he will know that coastal resorts have been particularly badly hit, as they rely to a considerable extent on the hospitality sector. That said, northern Lincolnshire and the Humber can play a major part in the post-pandemic economic recovery. Will the Prime Minister give an assurance that the Government will continue to support established and new businesses in the area?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. We will ensure that we support businesses throughout the pandemic. I am absolutely certain that the hospitality industry in Cleethorpes and the surrounding area will bounce back very strongly indeed.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The Prime Minister indicated in his statement that wearing face masks will still be a factor in the fight against covid over the months ahead. Many people with hidden disabilities are unable to wear face masks, yet many of them face abuse when they go out in public and people do not realise that they are exempt from wearing face coverings. Will the Prime Minister commit to a public awareness campaign for people with hidden disabilities so that they do not face abuse in public?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. I will make sure that we do even more to get that point over to people, so that people who cannot wear face masks because of their disabilities do not face that kind of abuse.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: Will the Government do more to improve air flow, control and extraction in health settings, and to make more safe use of powerful ultraviolet cleaners to reduce cross-infection further?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises a very interesting point. Our scientific advisers are looking at everything we can do, including the means that he suggests, to reduce transmission of the disease.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP) [V]: Scientific research from leading Scottish universities has today shown substantial reductions in serious covid-19 hospital admissions following the administration of the first dose of the vaccine. Given this success, does the Prime Minister agree that it is now time to prioritise critical public servants, such as teachers

[Steven Bonnar]

and other key workers, to ensure that maximum protections are in place as we begin to ease our way out of this lockdown?

The Prime Minister: I think that most people in this House would agree that the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation was right in its prioritisation of those who are most vulnerable, and that our ambition in the vaccine roll-out programme should be to vaccinate first those who are most at risk of serious disease and death; that is the right approach.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement this afternoon and very much hope that it is matched by the First Minister's statement to the Scottish Parliament tomorrow, because it is better for business—not least the tourism and hospitality sector—that the whole country moves at the same pace. In that vein, does the Prime Minister agree that the incredible success, pace and take-up of the vaccine just shows what this country can achieve when we do it together?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is completely right. It has been a stunning example of the whole of the UK working together to roll out a programme that has been absolutely vital for our whole country. Co-operation with the devolved Administrations has been terrific on this, but it is something that could not have been achieved without the UK working together.

Stephen Kinno (Aberavon) (Lab) [V]: The Prime Minister should know that there can be no post-pandemic economic recovery without a strong and healthy UK steel industry, but he should also know that our steelworkers are having to compete with one hand tied behind their backs because electricity costs our steelmakers 86% more than in Germany and 62% more than in France. What steps will the Prime Minister be taking to reduce British electricity costs to internationally competitive levels so that our steel industry can thrive in the wake of the pandemic?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Of course, that was one of the consequences of some of the taxes and some of the skewing of the prices that have been chosen over many years by Governments. We want to ensure that we have a steel industry in this country that is able to compete, and we must indeed address the discriminatory costs of energy; he is completely right to raise this point.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just a quick reminder that questions should be about the covid statement.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: Thank you very much on behalf of Whipsnade zoo, but will the Prime Minister now instruct that a further test case be taken to the courts so that those hospitality businesses whose business interruption insurance is still not paying out can get the relief that they need, having paid thousands in premiums, for decades in some cases?

The Prime Minister: I do hope that the businesses concerned receive the compensation that they are owed and deserve from their insurance packages, but in the

meantime I urge my hon. Friend to look out for what the Chancellor is going to say next week about continued support.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the road map that has been put before the House this afternoon, because Bradford has had extra restrictions since July. The Prime Minister outlined plans for opening the hospitality industry by 12 April, but he said that the wedding industry, with its larger venues, would not be able to open before 21 June. For some businesses, those 10 weeks could make the difference between closure and bankruptcy. We have some amazing wedding venues in Bradford; they are a big part of our industry here. Like restaurants, they could open with people staying 2 metres apart, so I urge the Prime Minister to reconsider whether wedding venues could be opened sooner. I invite him to come and look at some of our amazing wedding venues in Bradford West, as we have so many beautiful ones.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to take up the hon. Lady's invitation to visit the beautiful wedding venues of Bradford. I know that they do an amazing job there. But, in answer to her point, we cannot do full Cecil B. DeMille weddings earlier than 21 June—we can do smaller weddings before then, as she knows—but at least the great businesses that she talks about now have a date to think about and to aim for.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, and in particular for the inclusion of dates that will help businesses to plan. However, with respect to international travel, the inside page of our passport requests, in the name of Her Majesty,

“all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance”.

With regard to quarantine hotels, may I remind the Prime Minister that just because a policy is popular, that does not mean that it is right?

The Prime Minister: I have a high regard for my hon. Friend, whom I have known for many years, and I know that he speaks for many in our party and beyond in what he says. These are difficult judgments to make, as I know he appreciates, but it is right, when we are facing a pandemic and the risk of new variants, to have a very tough border and quarantine policy indeed.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: The Prime Minister has been asked several times about how the Government procured contracts during the pandemic. My question to him is slightly different. Are there any plans for the Government to claw back any of the funds spent on pandemic contracts that have failed—for example, those that have delivered unusable or unsafe personal protective equipment, at great expense to the taxpayer?

The Prime Minister: Some 99.5% of the PPE that we have received has been of a high standard, but of course, where people have fallen down on their contracts, we will claw back the money that we have paid.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con) [V]: I want to congratulate our NHS and my right hon. Friend on the great British success story that is the vaccination programme. Because the UK is ahead of others on vaccination,

we can open up sooner. My right hon. Friend said that he would focus on data, not dates, but these five-week dates seem arbitrary. If progress against the four tests looks better than expected, might the Government be flexible and review the data and restrictions on a weekly or fortnightly basis, and not on predetermined dates?

The Prime Minister: These “not before” dates are not arbitrary; they are crucial. They are determined by the time we need to evaluate the impact on the pandemic of the openings-up that we are doing. For instance, we will need four weeks to see whether the opening of schools has caused an uncontrollable surge in the pandemic, and then a week to give advice and so on. So they are not arbitrary; they are dictated by the science, and that is the right way forward. But if we look at the overall road map, we see that it is beyond what many other countries are currently able to achieve, and that, as my hon. Friend rightly says, is thanks to the roll-out of the vaccination programme.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab) [V]: Five local NHS areas in England, including Hammersmith and Fulham, have vaccinated 73% or less of the over-70s, despite the best efforts of NHS and public health staff and volunteers. This falls to a 60% take-up for the most deprived tenth of residents and below 50% for some ethnic minority groups. As the country moves on to vaccinate younger and less at-risk groups, what comfort can the Prime Minister give to the quarter of my elderly and vulnerable constituents that his Government have left behind?

The Prime Minister: Take-up is accelerating among all those groups, but the hon. Member is right to say that it has been slower in some groups than in others. That is why we have rolled out the network of community champions. However, it is also important for him and for all of us to champion the uptake of vaccines across all our communities in our constituencies.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: The vaccine roll-out has been more successful than even the most optimistic of us could have predicted in December. While the Prime Minister is clearly right to insist that this road map must be irreversible so that we do not risk a further lockdown, will he ensure that, if vaccinations prove to be as effective as we all hope, the Government can continue to review whether later stages might progress more quickly as long as the numbers of deaths and hospital admissions continue to fall?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, which I am sure will have occurred to many other colleagues and people up and down the country. I have given the reason for the interval between the dates I set out: we need to be certain about the impact of the relaxations we are making, with the four weeks plus one that we need. The other point is that I think people would much rather have a date they know is as certain as it can possibly be at this stage to fix on and work towards rather than more uncertainty and fluidity.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con) [V]: Last week, I met Kathy the practice manager and the team, including volunteers, at St James medical practice who have vaccinated thousands of people in North West

Norfolk. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to them and those at other sites in King's Lynn and Snettisham who are making it possible to reopen our hospitality sector—albeit more slowly than some would want—as well as importantly reopening our schools and other businesses in the coming weeks?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do. I thank everyone involved in the vaccination programme in North West Norfolk, and I thank my hon. Friend for championing the vaccinators.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: Last week, the gaps in support all-party parliamentary group heard evidence on how tens of thousands of women have been forgotten about during the pandemic. Will the Prime Minister meet with Maternity Action, Pregnant Then Screwed, Bethany Power and Sonali Joshi to hear how he can redress the unfairness faced by those who were pregnant and on maternity leave during the pandemic?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member makes an important point. I will certainly ensure that the relevant Minister receives such a delegation.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con) [V]: In view of the Prime Minister's sensible commitment to act on the basis of data not dates, which I fully support, will he clarify whether there is scope and flexibility in his road map to go faster in relaxing restrictions if the vaccination programme proceeds more rapidly than expected and the data shows enhanced effectiveness of a vaccine—as more of that data comes forward—resulting in radically reduced transmission and hospital admissions? Surely if we are following the data, that flexibility has to work both ways.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. This is already a very fast unlocking programme by international standards. As I have explained, the timetable is dictated by the intervals we need to evaluate the effect of each successive unlocking. I think that what people want to see—what businesses want—is as much certainty as possible, rather than uncertainty, and that is what we aim to provide.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab) [V]: Forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I did not hear the Prime Minister's reply just then because one of the Zoom operators was talking to another Member. The Prime Minister is absolutely right to say we should be driven by the data and not dates, and that his dates are therefore subject to review. Given the stunning success of the vaccination programme, with the evidence today of how it prevents serious illness and death, why is he not prepared to bring his dates forward, as well as back, if the data justifies that?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman did not hear my answer to the previous question, so I will repeat it, because his question is identical to several previous questions. The answer is that we need time to evaluate the success or otherwise of each unlocking; we need four weeks to see what has happened. We must bear in mind that we are dealing with a disease that is extremely contagious and large numbers of people who are still unvaccinated and still very vulnerable, so we

[*The Prime Minister*]

have to proceed with caution. That is why there is the five-week interval that we have. The second reason is that we want a timetable that we can stick to. People would really much rather have a sense of certainty and security—the maximum possible certainty and security—rather than any sense that this is fluid again and the date they have in their heads could change. That is very, very important. Certainty in this particular road map is of great value.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: In Wales, excess deaths over the five-year average are 13% more, compared with a figure of 20% more in England. So will the Prime Minister ensure that the UK Government website says, “If you live in more highly infectious areas of England, you should not travel to Wales”?

The Prime Minister: The restrictions throughout the country apply in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and they will continue to apply for the duration of the pandemic.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: I really welcome the Prime Minister’s statement, which will give certainty to businesses and constituents in Harlow, and it is good news about school reopenings on 8 March. Given that so many children have lost months of school, with an impact on their education, attainment and mental health, will he ensure that every pupil is assessed for their loss of learning and how much catch-up is needed? Will he consider extending the school day, not by putting an extra burden on teachers and support staff, but by using civil society to offer sporting activities, mental health support and academic catch-up, where necessary?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend. That is exactly why I have appointed Sir Kevan Collins to be the educational recovery commissioner, to champion all those ideas and initiatives that my right hon. Friend has just rightly mentioned. He will be hearing more about that all later this week.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: Although the Government’s announcement that indoor care home visiting for one named person—one named relative—is to be permitted from 8 March sounds like progress, the fact that this remains a matter for guidance only is very concerning. The Joint Committee on Human Rights has heard too many examples of previous guidance on this issue not being followed, denying meaningful visits when they might safely be facilitated. The Joint Committee has drafted regulations that would ensure that nobody in a care home was denied a face-to-face visit without a carefully thought through, individualised risk assessment. Will the Prime Minister commit to bringing these regulations into force?

The Prime Minister: I direct the hon. and learned Lady to what I said earlier about ensuring that people get the ability to see a nominated visitor, and I remind her of the sad reality of the infection that we have seen in care homes and the need to protect against it. There is a balance to be struck, as she knows.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. Everyone—especially young people, small businesses and the hospitality

and pubs sector—in North West Durham and across the country have made massive sacrifices to achieve the huge progress in tackling the pandemic. As long as the Government’s world-leading vaccine programme continues, the road map means that we will be out of almost all restrictions by late June, with the certain approach that the Prime Minister is pushing for. May I extend an invitation to the Prime Minister, his fiancée Carrie, Wilfred and Dilyn to visit North West Durham this summer, to see some of Britain’s most beautiful but least well-known countryside?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. Wild horses would not keep me away from North West Durham.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: Earlier this month, nearly half the constituents I surveyed reported severe financial insecurity. Shockingly, almost a third also said that they struggled to afford daily living costs. That is the financial reality of millions around the country. One respondent told me that they feel utterly hopeless about their financial situation. The Prime Minister could now deliver some peace of mind for my constituents by agreeing to extend the support schemes that have kept many families afloat during this crisis, including payments for people self-isolating. Will he do so?

The Prime Minister: We will continue to look after people throughout the pandemic.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Our vaccine roll-out has been an amazing success so far, and I want to thank those in the Eston primary care network, Redcar Hospital, James Cook University Hospital and the Government for their efforts in delivering it. We are hitting targets and reaching new milestones each day, and soon we will have the Novavax vaccine, made in Teesside, to help us as well. When does the Prime Minister expect this new Teesside vaccine to be approved by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency?

The Prime Minister: I was thrilled to go up to Teesside to see the site where the Novavax vaccine will be made and look at one of the bioreactors that will be used. I cannot give my hon. Friend an exact date by which the MHRA will give approval, but we are pretty confident that it will be forthcoming before too long.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab) [V]: Is the Prime Minister aware of the Catch Up With Cancer campaign and the urgent need for funding to clear the cancer backlog? Without it, we risk turning the covid crisis into a cancer crisis, with tens of thousands more lives lost. Will he commit to the funding to create a world-class cancer service and work with the Catch Up With Cancer campaign to deliver the investment in the cancer workforce, new equipment and IT networks that we urgently need to tackle this backlog?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and the hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. That is why we are investing an extra £52 billion into the NHS but also tackling the backlog caused by the pandemic in cancer and many other conditions. The point he makes should be attended to by all those who think that another wave of covid is something we can simply put up with easily. The NHS is

already under terrific pressure, and the more covid we have, the more it displaces other vital treatments, as he rightly points out.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con) [V]: This morning I visited Manor Academy in Mansfield Woodhouse to see the amazing job it has done in setting up covid testing for pupils and staff. It is very keen to see its children back in school, as it knows that the inequalities that existed pre covid will only have been exacerbated by closures. Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that wide-ranging support will be offered to schools to address not just academic issues but the social and emotional challenges that many children will face as a result of those closures?

The Prime Minister: Yes. One of the most important things we can do is not just support kids' mental health, address those issues and help teachers to address them, but also invest in one-on-one tutoring, which will be of massive value to kids who have come under particular stress and who have fallen behind but who may show great potential that needs to be unleashed. One-to-one tutoring is something we will be investing in heavily.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab) [V]: To add to the helter-skelter of various pending cliff-edge dates—stamp duty, the eviction ban, business rates, universal credit, the furlough—a little-known one ended yesterday, with the expiry date on those who are shielding being able to claim a four-month supply of free vitamin D. Will the Prime Minister tell us whether the 1.7 million new shielders just added to the list will be eligible? Will he advertise this more widely, and, given how vitamin D builds immunity to all viruses, even for people who are not yet eligible for their vaccination, will he commit to a year-long advertising campaign for all? Kellogg's is on board; will he do it?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady very much for what she says about vitamin D. She is right about the value that that vitamin can have and we will make sure that we give it due publicity.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Prime Minister's statement today and acknowledge the tremendous leadership that he has shown in driving forward the vaccine programme. As my right hon. Friend is aware, the tourism and hospitality sectors are vital to the Fylde economy and they are ready and willing to trade their way to recovery. Will he assure me that he will keep the sector at the front of his thoughts both ahead of next week's Budget and when implementing his road map?

The Prime Minister: The tourism sector is absolutely vital for our country and the faster that we can get it open, the better, but the best way to open it up fastest is to have a road map from which we do not deviate and on which we are not forced to go backwards. That is what we are setting out today and I am glad that we have my hon. Friend's support.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) [V]: The Prime Minister has today acknowledged the importance of holidays abroad but also that strict quarantine is essential to address the global transmission of covid.

The aviation sector has estimated that, at best, aviation will return in the UK to only a third of 2019 levels this year and that full recovery could take five years, so when will the Government release their delayed aviation recovery plan, and what additional support will they provide for communities such as mine and the Prime Minister's, who are dependent on the aviation sector for employment?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will be hearing a lot more about that and other matters on 12 April.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend has quite rightly placed emphasis on the reopening of schools, with the return to school of all children in England on 8 March. In Wales, primary schoolchildren aged seven and under will return this week, while it is hoped that the remainder of primary schoolchildren and some older pupils taking qualifications may return on 15 March. However, there appear to be no plans until after Easter in Wales—beyond the reopening of some non-essential shops—for most secondary school pupils to return. Will the Prime Minister urge the Welsh Government to reconsider their approach, given the harm that young people have already endured during the pandemic?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. Obviously, that is a matter for the devolved authority, but I am sure that he shares my hope that all pupils will be back in school as fast as possible and that we will hear from the Labour party in Wales that schools are safe.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab) [V]: In Liverpool, only 23% of those who applied for a test, trace and isolate payment received it, and over two fifths of them received a discretionary payment from money that is now exhausted. Effectively facilitating isolation will be key in preventing the resurgence of the virus via new strains that might compromise the vaccine, so does the Prime Minister accept that eligibility for the test, trace and isolate payment is not drawn widely enough to provide support to those who need it and who cannot afford to stop work without extra help? Will he agree to extend it to include all those people who have no access to statutory sick pay?

The Prime Minister: We will continue to support all those who are isolating. Indeed, we will do what we can to increase our support for them, but we will also support everybody throughout this pandemic. The hon. Lady should wait for the Chancellor to announce his Budget next week.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I want to welcome and to raise a hallelujah, along with parents and children, for the good sense of schools returning for all pupils from 8 March. It is the right thing to do on so many levels. May I ask the Prime Minister, however, what evidence has driven his decision that outdoor sport—not in-school outdoor sport, but wider outdoor sport—for those same children cannot go ahead for another month? Furthermore, can he say why, after all the good work that they did last year to create covid-secure environments, restaurants and cafés face another three months before they can open in any meaningful way? What is the evidence that he has seen that has convinced him to make that decision today?

The Prime Minister: Outdoor sport for schools can go ahead from 8 March, as I said earlier. The evidence for all the decisions that we have taken—a massive quantity of scientific evidence—has been deposited today with the House.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: Our covid rates in Yorkshire have fallen much more slowly than those in London and the south-east, partly because fewer people can work from home and more people in our towns have to go out to work to keep our factories and distribution centres running. The Prime Minister keeps saying that he is supporting self-isolation, but most workers are not getting that support, and that is particularly hitting our manufacturing towns. Will he think again? Will he extend that support, help those workers, and help us to get our rates down?

The Prime Minister: We are increasing our support, as I have said, for people who are self-isolating and continue to look after our workers throughout the pandemic. The best thing for all those businesses in Yorkshire is to continue, as they are doing, to get the disease down and keep it under control.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am afraid that we have mislaid Alec Shelbrooke, but we will try to return to him. We move straight to Vicky Foxcroft.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: Disabled people have been one of the hardest-hit groups during this pandemic. Communication with disabled people and those shielding has been poor. Far too often, communications have been late and not in accessible formats, but the Prime Minister can seek to rectify that now. Will he provide a clear road map for those people shielding so that they know when it is safe for them to rejoin society?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. The road map is here. It is the one that the hon. Lady should have with her now. It is online, and the measures specifically for disabled people and for those shielding are clearly set out.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his sensible and measured statement, just as I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) in thanking all those across the Tees Valley involved in the vaccine roll-out so far. Children and parents will be delighted that schools across England will return on 8 March. I fear greatly that white working-class children will have borne the brunt of the lack of progress in educational attainment during this time. May I urge a specific focus on targeted support for those young people as we rebuild our country?

The Prime Minister: I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. We will support all pupils who have suffered loss to their learning as a result of the pandemic. That is why we have now distributed 1.3 million laptops and put another £1.3 billion into catch-up of all kinds. He is totally right to focus on this. It is the No. 1 challenge that the country now faces.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): University students, many of whom were not eligible for furlough for their part-time jobs, were already struggling financially. Today's road map suggests that the vast majority of those students will not be able to return to their university accommodation until after Easter at best. They are legally being prevented from returning to accommodation for which they are obliged to pay. Does the Prime Minister think that that is fair? If he does not think that it is fair, what will he do about it?

The Prime Minister: I sympathise deeply with students who have had a time at university that no other generation has put up with. I sympathise deeply with their sense of unfairness, with the experiences they have had. They have been heroic, by the way, in the way in which they have been able to bring the disease down in some university towns by obeying the guidance. We will do whatever we can to support them, working with the university sector, to make up for the experiences they have been through and to make sure, insofar as we can, that we help them to get compensation.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): I very much welcome the Prime Minister's statement today and the sustainable way out of this situation. It is absolutely right that we prioritise the reopening of schools and getting all children back into the classroom. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is now essential we work with parents, teachers and schools to develop a long-term plan for pupils to catch up on the education they have missed out on, particularly in areas like Bolsover?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is why Sir Kevan Collins has been appointed as the education recovery commissioner. We will be setting out plans that are intended not just to remediate the loss that kids have suffered during the pandemic, but to take our educational system forward and to do things that we possibly would not have done before to find new ways of teaching and learning that will make up the difference for those kids and more.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We have relocated Alec Shelbrooke, so we will now go to him.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. In my constituency there are a lot of strong community events, especially things like Zumba classes, about which I get a lot of emails. When does my right hon. Friend envisage indoor activities like Zumba classes will be allowed to start again in village halls and the like?

The Prime Minister: If one can do outdoor Zumba, then 29 March is the date—assuming you cannot do it one on one, in which case you could do it earlier. Indoors, as my right hon. Friend will have picked up from what I said earlier, is currently down for 17 May, along with all other indoor settings.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab) [V]: Macmillan Cancer Support warns that more than 100,000 people who live with cancer in the UK are struggling to cover basic living costs due to the impact of covid-19. Tragically, many cancer patients who are having difficulty paying

for essentials have experienced suicidal thoughts in recent months. Will the Prime Minister commit to making the £20 per week universal credit increase permanent and extend the uplift to legacy benefits?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is totally right to raise the issue of cancer patients and other patients who need treatment. We are going to do everything we can to clear the backlog as fast as we possibly can. That is one of the reasons we have to keep the covid virus going down. He will hear more next week from the Chancellor about supporting people across the country.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): It seems to me that many of the 88 people who have gone before me and been critical of the Prime Minister have been wise after the event, so let me now do precisely that and plead guilty to the charge. If severe quarantine measures had from the very start been as effective as those in Australia, and, equally, if tough local lockdowns had been as effective as those in China, does that not rather beg the question—why we did not do it over a year ago? I do not say that to be difficult, but to learn for the future and to ponder on what we should do next time. I think many people in the country think it is better to be tough on foreign travel than tough on children attending schools.

The Prime Minister: I think my right hon. Friend speaks for many people in the country when he says that. We do have a very tough regime on international travel—one of the toughest in the world—and we will certainly be making sure we learn all the lessons we need to about the early handling of the pandemic.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab) [V]: Events and exhibitions companies in my constituency are still struggling to get any support for lost business. The fact that they are not customer facing means that they do not get the retail, hospitality and leisure grant. The fact that they have not actually been forced to close, although they service businesses that have, means that they have lost out on the council's now closed local restrictions support grant. They are not arts organisations as such, so they do not get the Arts Council funding, and the advice and guidance that is being given to local councils about what grants they should be giving to the events and exhibitions sector is incredibly vague and inconsistent. What reassurance can the Prime Minister give me that, in the Chancellor's Budget next week, there will finally be help for those companies, like the ones in my constituency, that are absolutely on their last legs?

The Prime Minister: I am acutely conscious of the businesses that have fallen through the cracks, as it were—wholesalers, for instance, that have found it difficult to qualify under one scheme or another—and we are doing absolutely everything we can to make sure that we give the support that people want. There is extra discretionary funding available for councils to support such businesses, and the hon. Member will be hearing more, certainly from the Chancellor next week.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. Millions of young people have had their lives put on hold over the past 13 months and they have been the least likely to suffer severely

from this virus, so I wonder whether the Prime Minister can look ahead and inform me and the House what we can do to help those university students who are going to enter the job market for the first time and those leaving school. Right now they look ahead and they look, post lockdown, into a world that is very uncertain, and their future must be safeguarded, so what can we do?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a vital point, and that is why we have the £2 billion kickstart fund in addition to many other schemes to help young people into work and to help them with what could be a very difficult transition, but the best thing possible is to get the economy open and firing again.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The German equivalent of furlough, the Kurzarbeit scheme, will be accessible to employers until at least the end of this year. Given that the Prime Minister said that the United Kingdom would “prosper mightily” outside the European Union, why cannot his Government—or why will not his Government—provide that level of certainty and support to employers on these islands so that they can plan with some confidence for our new post-pandemic normal?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member will be hearing a lot more next week about the support that we are going to give throughout the whole of the UK. While we are on the subject, perhaps he could confirm that the Scottish nationalist party would have remained in the European Medicines Agency. I think he is a member of the SNP.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: Last year, a wonderful young couple in my constituency had to cancel their wedding because of covid. They contacted me this morning so that I could ask the Prime Minister whether he could guarantee their wedding would be able to go ahead on 1 July, and if he can, Briana and Jordan will send a wedding invite in the post tonight.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. I cannot absolutely guarantee that Briana and Jordan's wedding will be able to go ahead on 1 July, but if we can stick with this road map, and I hope very much that we can, then all is set fair for them, and I hope the sun will shine on them both with or without my presence.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab) [V]: We have more than 120,000 covid deaths, the highest death rate of any large country in the world, and the deepest recession of any major economy. This is the Government's horrific pandemic record. The Prime Minister now claims that he has taken a cautious approach to easing restrictions, but Government scientists themselves have warned that the big bang reopening of schools on 8 March could lead to the infection rate rising above 1, triggering an exponential increase in cases. Nine education unions have described the plans as “reckless”, so instead of repeating his mistakes, will the Prime Minister listen to teachers and scientists, and follow the devolved Administrations with a phased return to schools?

The Prime Minister: Perhaps the hon. Member might direct her fire at her own Front Bench and the Leader of the Opposition, because he has just quite rightly supported those plans. I think she has possibly been failing to pay attention—[*Interruption.*] No, he is withdrawing

[*The Prime Minister*]

his support. I told you—I told you—but there you go. We have been here barely two hours, and it has gone again: one minute you have it, the next minute it has gone. There you are. I thought he was with us on reopening schools, but never mind.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con) [V]: The success of our north Wales economy is critically dependent on visitors from the rest of the UK, and indeed the world. Llandudno is the queen of resorts and is the largest in Wales. Our hoteliers are eager once again to open their arms and offer a warm welcome to visitors. Will my right hon. Friend continue his good work with the Welsh Government to ensure that no obstacles are put in the way of visitors? Will he confirm that shared prosperity funds will be used to accelerate economic recovery in places like Aberconwy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend mentions Llandudno, where I recall spending an absolutely hysterical new year's eve in the St Tudno Hotel. I seem to remember it was 1997—a wonderful year. I wish that hotel and all others in Llandudno all the very best. We will get them open just as soon as we possibly can. I thank my hon. Friend for his representations.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: What the Prime Minister said earlier about a zero-covid solution is simply not true. Since he lifted lockdown prematurely in December, which I voted against, we have had 60,000 deaths, whereas there have been fewer than 1,400 deaths across all the countries with a zero-covid plan, despite their populations being 20 times bigger than ours. Those unnecessary deaths are on him, and he is still refusing to learn the lessons. Last month, the Prime Minister called schools “vectors of transmission”, yet he is recklessly forcing 10 million school pupils and staff to return on just one day. Does not that run the very real risk of the virus running out of control yet again?

The Prime Minister: This is one of those moments when I sympathise very much with the Leader of the Opposition, because there speaks the authentic voice of the union-dominated Labour left. I do not think the hon. Gentleman is right in what he says. I think most people in this country understand that schools need to go back. I just heard from the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) that he does support schools returning on 8 March, which is good news.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con) [V]: Prime Minister, you have timed step two perfectly. Why do I say that? Fosse Shopping Park in my constituency—one of Britain's biggest out-of-town shopping centres—has expanded, with a £168 million investment including the UK flagship Next store. It was due to open last year; obviously, covid did not allow that, but it will open just as soon as you allow it to open. Will you do the honours, come and cut the ribbon, and help to boost consumer confidence across our country?

The Prime Minister: As I have told the House, non-essential retail will reopen on 12 April. I doubt that I am essential to the opening of Fosse Park, but I am

grateful to my hon. Friend for the invitation. I am sure that if I cannot get there, he will do a magnificent job in my place.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: I am very concerned about the large numbers of care home staff in black and ethnic minority groups who will not take up the vaccine. Local authorities have for weeks been asking the Government to supply the detailed data they need to identify and resolve vaccine non-compliance. As the Prime Minister knows, the vaccine roll-out is a race against time. Will he make the data available today, so we can ensure that enough people take the vaccine for us to reach the herd immunity necessary to prevent another lockdown?

The Prime Minister: We are making as much data available as we possibly can. Clearly, we cannot make people's medical records available because that would breach patient confidentiality. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the question of take-up among some groups and care home staff. That has been increasing, but we all need to work together to ensure that we encourage everybody to come forward and take the vaccine.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Prime Minister raised the possibility of new variants having an impact on the plan. Ordinarily, the laws of natural selection will favour more benign variants. However, lockdown reverses that, favouring the more potent. Therefore, in addition to an urgency on the basis of the economic and social costs of lockdown, there is indeed also a scientific urgency to lift it, isn't there?

The Prime Minister: I defer to my right hon. Friend's doubtless superior understanding of the biology of the variants, but I have a couple of reassuring points for him. First, we have no reason to think that our vaccines are ineffective in preventing death or serious illness against all the variants of which we are currently aware. Secondly, our scientists are getting ever better at evolving new vaccines to tackle the new variants.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]: The Prime Minister is right to prioritise education and to say that people can now do outdoor activities more freely—or, at least, they will be able to over the coming weeks and months—but he says nothing about outdoor education, which is an industry of vast importance to us in the lakes and dales, and of great value to young people right across the country. There are 15,000 people employed in the sector; at least, there were, but some 6,000 have now lost their jobs. If we lose that sector, it will be very difficult ever to get it back and we will suffer hugely as a country if that happens. Will the Prime Minister agree to reopen outdoor education or residential stays from the summer term, so that we can take advantage of the skills of the professionals in outdoor education to help our young people to re-engage with a love of learning and to tackle many of the mental health issues that they face? If he is not able to make that guarantee, will he at least do what has been done in Northern Ireland and Scotland by providing a bespoke financial package to support and save our outdoor education sector?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman makes a really interesting point. As he knows, indoor education is opening on 8 March. Given that transmission is much less likely outdoors, I would have thought, a fortiori, that outdoor education should be able to open on the same date, but I will make sure that we get back to the hon. Gentleman if that should, for any reason, turn out not to be the case. I cannot see why it should not be the case, but we will get back to him.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) [V]: As the owner of one of my local hair salons has just said, the future now looks a little brighter thanks to this road map. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking the wonderful volunteers, GPs, pharmacies and nurses who have helped to administer thousands of vaccines in my area? Will he also ensure that the Chancellor announces in his Budget support for the wedding, hospitality and events sectors, which will have to wait just a little bit longer now before they can fully reopen safely?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has caught the tone exactly right; there is just a little bit longer to go now. The Chancellor will be setting out the support that we need to put in place for all the businesses that he mentions. I echo his support and thanks to them, particularly to hair salons, which I look forward to being able to use myself without too much delay.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement.

Point of Order

5.53 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Prime Minister has today outlined a very helpful road map for reopening our economy and our society. Does any such plan exist for our House of Commons? The Prime Minister obviously referred to Parliament in his statement. The House of Commons remains, by any standard, a shadow of its former self in terms of the debate that is held, let alone the range and the effectiveness of scrutiny of the Executive, which is, after all, our job. Does any plan exist for the House of Commons, and when might we get sight of that?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. As he knows, the House's procedures have adapted and continue to adapt in the light of covid-19. I do understand the points that he makes, but it will be up to the Government to bring forward a motion to extend or amend our current arrangements. I am sure that Ministers, including the Prime Minister, will have heard his comments.

I now suspend the House for three minutes to make the necessary arrangements for the next business.

5.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19

5.58 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I beg to move,

That this House has considered covid-19.

When I last spoke in this Chamber in a general covid debate, on 12 January, we faced a very grave situation. There was a very real risk of our hospitals being overwhelmed, the number of people tragically dying from covid-19 each day was in four figures, and our vaccine roll-out was just getting off the ground. As I stand here today, we have made huge progress, and while there is no room for complacency, thankfully we now face a very different picture.

That we find ourselves in this changed position is largely down to three factors. The first is our amazing NHS and social care workforce. The pressure they have experienced has been phenomenal. Their response to that pressure has been humbling to all of us: the teamwork, the resilience, the dedication. It has been truly inspiring. They have our admiration and our thanks, and we must always reiterate that, but they must also continue to have our unwavering support in the months ahead as we build back better after this pandemic.

The second factor is, of course, our national lockdown. On 12 January, the average number of cases per day was 44,302; more than 30,000 people were in hospital with covid-19; and, on average, more than 1,000 people were dying of the disease each day. Today, we see an average of just over 11,000 cases each day; just under 20,000 people in hospitals with covid; and a heartening and welcome decline in the number of deaths.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): One of the great differences between the start of this nightmare and where we are now is on personal protective equipment for health and care staff, which was a big issue at the start. There were a lot of stories over the weekend about the procurement of PPE. I know from my time as a Minister in the Department that sometimes government is not elegant, but surely what we did was to make sure that we did not run out of PPE. We should congratulate many of the officials in the Department on making sure that that did not happen, as history records it did not. For my constituents who are concerned about the process that went on, will the Minister reassure me that everything was above where it should be?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend was a distinguished Minister in the Department for some time and rightly highlights the situation that we faced at the height of the first wave of the pandemic. It is testament to the phenomenal efforts to procure PPE of the officials in my Department, in the Paymaster General's Department and others that we did not run out of PPE in this country. Indeed, credit for that should also go to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who ensured that throughout he put the provision of PPE and people first, even when, as we have seen, that may have led to challenges and to process not being entirely adhered to in respect of the timings for the publication of contract details. He and I have the greatest respect not only for the recent judgment, which we will consider carefully, but for the importance

of transparency. I believe that my right hon. Friend did the right thing: he did everything he could to ensure that his No. 1 priority was to get that PPE procured and to the frontline to protect those who were protecting all of us and helping to save lives.

As on so many occasions over the past year, in recent weeks the British people have once again made huge sacrifices to comply with the necessary restrictions. It has been incredibly hard for individuals and businesses up and down the country, but in the figures that I have set out, we can see the impact that those sacrifices have had in helping to suppress the spread of this virus.

Despite the progress, over the past week an average of 449 people still lost their lives each day—449 families and friends who have lost loved ones. It is still far, far too many. It reminds us that, even now, as we map a brighter course forward, we must never lose sight of the threat posed by this virus.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): When I asked the Prime Minister a question about his road map a short while ago, he said that he supported a public awareness campaign for people who cannot wear face coverings but are subject to abuse because people are not aware of their exemption. Does the Minister support such a campaign and will he make the same commitment as the Prime Minister, so that people do not face abuse, and so that people are educated and know that there are reasons why people cannot wear face coverings?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman makes a typically measured and sensible point. He is absolutely right: those who are exempt from wearing face coverings for medical reasons should be able to go about their lives without fear of abuse or verbal or other attacks on them for not doing so. I heard what the Prime Minister said and I echo those words. The Paymaster General and I will look carefully at what the hon. Gentleman has just suggested in respect of what we can do as a Government to raise awareness of the fact that there are people who, for entirely legitimate reasons, are not wearing face coverings.

Finally, I turn to the third factor that has changed the situation for the better. That, of course, is our vaccine roll-out, which throughout has been key to the future. As of today, we have provided a first dose to over 17.5 million people. That is almost one in three adults in the United Kingdom. Vaccine take-up has surpassed our expectations. In England, for example, we have now given a first dose to 93% of the over-80s, to 96% of those aged between 70 and 79, and to 94% of eligible care home residents. Those are phenomenal achievements—the result of a huge team effort. In that context, I pay tribute to our NHS, to pharmacists, to the armed forces and, of course, to the army of volunteers who have done their bit to help make this process run as smoothly as it has.

Those are vital achievements because we know that vaccines save lives. The cohorts we are currently working to vaccinate by mid-April represent some 99% of covid deaths, but we will not rest until we can offer that protection to everyone. We urge, and I would urge, everyone who has been offered the vaccine to take up that offer, as I will certainly be doing when I become eligible to receive it. It is safe and it is saving lives.

With an average of 358,341 doses being given each and every day in the UK and more vaccines coming on stream in the spring, I believe that we can confidently begin to look to the future. That is why a few moments ago, at this Dispatch Box, the Prime Minister set out his road map for how we will carefully but irreversibly unlock our country. As he set out, it is based on four tests: first, that the vaccine deployment programme continues successfully; secondly, that evidence shows that vaccines are sufficiently effective in reducing hospitalisations and deaths; thirdly, that infection rates do not pose a risk of a surge in hospitalisations that would put unsustainable pressure on the NHS; and fourthly, that our assessment of the risks is not fundamentally changed by new variants of the virus that cause concern.

Our road map out of lockdown will be taken, as my right hon. Friend set out, in four steps, each step reflecting the reality on the ground, not just our understandable expectations and desires. At every stage, our decisions will be led by data, not dates, with at least five weeks between steps; we will review the data every four weeks and give one week's notice of any changes. The dates that my right hon. Friend set out today are not target dates; they are, importantly, "no earlier than" dates. We will continue to undertake statutory reviews, including the one taking place today. Yet in doing so, we are ever mindful of those expectations and desires.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I am confused. If we are having this driven by data, why are we worrying about timetables and dates? The Minister mentioned "no earlier than" dates, but why? This is data-driven, not date-driven. There seems to be mixed messaging here.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—indeed, my friend—for that point. The reason we are doing this is that we have been clear throughout, and the Prime Minister has been clear throughout, that this should be the last lockdown we experience and that, once we relax these restrictions, they should be irreversibly relaxed. That is why we are doing it in a staged way, one step at a time, and we will continue to monitor the data, which I hope and believe will continue to go in the right direction. But it is because we do not wish to see anything happen that could cause us to pause or reverse that we are taking it step by step.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): But if the data surprise us on the upside, would it be possible to look again at those dates and take advantage of that?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. What we have sought to do here is to set out a road map that is measured and cautious but provides, as much as we can, that degree of certainty to allow people to plan for the future. We do not want to set out expectations that are unlikely to be met, and therefore this plan is based on those "at the earliest" dates. If I may, I will make a bit of progress, and then, if we have time—I am conscious of the time—he may wish to return to that point.

We know how tough lockdown has been on people—on individuals, on families and on businesses—and naturally we are beginning—

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con)
rose—

Edward Argar: If I may just finish this point, then I will of course turn to my right hon. Friend. We are beginning with the things that people want to change most, the most important things being to see children return to classrooms, and to be able to begin to see our friends and family again.

Andrea Leadsom: Does my hon. Friend see, as he is hearing from our hon. Friends here in the Chamber, that setting out the very earliest dates assumes there is no harm caused by the continued lockdown but, in reality, if we remain locked down when we do not need to, every single day, that is causing harm to people?

Edward Argar: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Often in this Chamber we look at the impact in terms of hospitalisations, infection rates and deaths from covid, but—absolutely rightly—we also look at the impacts more broadly, and she highlights that it is not just deaths or illnesses directly attributable to covid that have an impact on people's lives, health and wellbeing. However, I come back to the point that the programme and the dates we have set out are reasonable, pragmatic and supported by what we believe reflects the roll-out of the vaccine to the different groups, and they give the public a degree of predictability that has not been there before. I share what I surmise is her view: I would not wish these restrictions to stay in place a day longer than absolutely necessary—I hope I do not misattribute a view to her there. What the Prime Minister set out earlier today achieves that, and does it in a very measured and sensible way that reduces significantly any risk of our seeing things slide backwards.

I am conscious of time. As the Prime Minister has set out before the House, all schools and colleges will return to face-to-face education on 8 March—

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Edward Argar: Very briefly, but this is the last intervention I will take from colleagues, I am afraid.

Chris Green: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Will he confirm one way or the other whether secondary school children will be compelled to wear masks in the classroom while they are trying to learn?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who highlights a point that, along with others, will be concerning parents and pupils. As we set out the plan for unlocking and reopening our schools, which my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary will add more detail to, we will look at how we can create an environment that is not only safe but that allows children and young people to learn, socialise and enjoy the benefits of not just education but being back in school. I know that my right hon. Friend will have listened carefully to my hon. Friend's point.

As I have just alluded to, we know how important being in school is for children—not only for their education but, as I said, for their social development and mental health. That is why it is a crucial first step, and getting children back into classrooms has unquestionably been the Government's chief priority.

[Edward Argar]

Within that first step, we also want to begin to meet that other great desire—for families to see those they love. From 8 March, every care home resident will be able to nominate a named visitor, who will be able to visit. From 29 March, up to six people, or two households, will be able to meet outdoors. At that point, outdoor sports will also be permitted, as long as they are in groups of up to six.

In respect of households meeting outdoors, I—I dare say along with many others in this House—look forward to that very much. Aside from a family funeral, 2019 was the last time I saw my parents in person, and I suspect that that goes for many people in this Chamber and, indeed, up and down the country. So we do understand just how important this issue is, and I believe that these first steps recognise that vital desire for human contact and for seeing friends and family. Our ambition is to maintain a healthy lifestyle, while also reflecting our continuing need to save lives, but until 29 March, our message continues to be, “Stay at home and stay local.”

As the Prime Minister set out, the road map sets out a broader package of measures for step two, which will be no earlier than 12 April. The rule of six, or two households, will continue to apply outdoors. Non-essential retail and personal care will be permitted to reopen, and domestic overnight stays in England will be allowed for individual households and bubbles in self-contained accommodation. The majority of outdoor settings will reopen, and hospitality, such as pubs and restaurants, will be allowed to resume table service to customers outdoors. At this point, we will also take a decision on whether we can extend the number of visitors to residents in care homes and set out a plan for the next phase of visits.

Step three, no earlier than 17 May, will take us closer to that normal life we yearn for, with the majority of legal restrictions on meeting others outdoors removed, although gatherings will be capped at 30 people. Six people or two households will be able to meet indoors, and indoor hospitality, entertainment and sports will be allowed. Finally, step four, no earlier than 21 June, will see us take key steps to larger scale events.

The Prime Minister set out in more detail the reviews that would underpin the steps and the support being put in place at this time and the support being continued for those who are affected. Conscious of time, I will not recount everything that my right hon. Friend said at this Dispatch Box just a short hour or two ago.

As we look to brighter days ahead, there are still difficult days immediately in front of us. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be setting out how we will continue to support businesses and individuals through this difficult time and how we can build back better in his Budget statement on 3 March. We will do all we can to ensure that British people remain safe: working to keep uptake of the vaccine high, continuing to ramp up testing, including normalising workplace testing as people return to their workplace in increasing numbers, and ensuring that we take proportionate steps at our borders to protect against new variants from abroad and, indeed, to protect the progress we have made as a country.

It is right, even as we move forward, that we tread carefully through the weeks ahead. I understand and can entirely appreciate the points made by hon. and right

hon. Friends from their understandable desire to move faster where we can. The Prime Minister understands that, too. I know him well, and no one more than he will not want to see restrictions in place a single day longer than is necessary, but we have learned that this virus can move in unpredictable ways.

We owe it to the NHS and social care staff on the frontline, to everyone involved in our incredible vaccine roll-out and, of course, to everyone in this country who has made such tremendous sacrifices over the past year to hold on to and build on the progress we have made. I believe we can do it by once more working together as a country, unified by a shared determination to see this disease beaten and to see our country return to normal. It has been a long and challenging path we have taken together, but as I stand here today, I do so with confidence in this road map—that route back to the future we all wish to see.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the shadow Minister, I remind hon. and right hon. Members that there will be a three-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches. When that is in effect, there will be a countdown clock visible on the screens of Members participating virtually and on the screens in the Chamber. For those participating physically, the usual clock in the Chamber will operate.

6.17 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): As we know, we are now a year into this pandemic. It has been a year unlike any we have experienced before, and it certainly was not the one we would have hoped for. The virus has turned the world as we know it upside down. We have seen the very best of many: our frontline health and social care workers who have selflessly looked after us, our key workers who have kept our vital services running and our country going, and our communities who have come together to support one another, especially those in need. But it has also been the very worst of times for many: families kept apart for months, individuals and businesses left with no support and, of course, the grim milestone of more than 120,000 deaths from coronavirus, which was reached this weekend. We know that each life lost is a tragedy that leaves behind devastated family and friends, and that death toll does need explaining. I will return to that issue later, but I would like to start on a more positive note.

As the Minister referred to in his opening remarks, more than 17.5 million people in the UK have received their first dose of the covid-19 vaccine. I echo his congratulations to everyone who has been involved in that roll-out. From the scientists to the NHS to the volunteers, it has been nothing short of brilliant, and it is something for us all to celebrate. While we are on the subject, we should also extend our congratulations to Mark Drakeford and the Welsh Government: Wales has become the first country in the UK to get through the first four priority groups.

I am sure that all of us have breathed a sigh of relief or even shed a tear when a parent or vulnerable family member or friend has received their first vaccine dose. Yesterday's news that all adults in the UK will have been offered their first dose by the end of July is very positive indeed, but can more be done? When Simon Stevens says that the NHS could deliver double the number of

vaccines it is currently delivering, we will all be asking, why is that not happening? With research showing that some minority groups are well behind the general population in terms of take-up, another question that I am sure Members will want to raise about the roll-out is: what can the Government do to vaccinate more people in hard-to-reach communities?

I am sure that many Members will have been moved by the story of Jo Whiley and her sister, Frances. She has talked about the anxiety shared by many families across the country. We know that people with learning disabilities are much more likely to die from coronavirus than the general population, with the death rate in England up to six times higher during the first wave of the pandemic, but currently only people with severe learning disabilities have been prioritised for the vaccine. I am sure the Minister is aware that over the weekend, at least one clinical commissioning group announced that it will be offering the vaccine to all patients on the learning disability register as part of priority group 6. I would be grateful if the Minister updated us on whether there are any plans to consider that issue again.

I have one last question regarding the vaccine. We have asked a number of times for the Government to publish figures on how many health and social care staff have been vaccinated. The Secretary of State said last week that a third of social care staff had still not been vaccinated, so I hope that when the Minister responds to the debate, she will be able to update us on those figures and on what more we can do to improve take-up in that group. It is vital that we look after the people who look after us in social care and the NHS. Our NHS rightly deserves huge congratulations on its impressive and speedy vaccine roll-out, but despite its incredible efforts, it will still take many months before the vaccine offers us widespread protection. With the emergence of new variants, increasing pressures on our health service and continuing high rates of transmission, it is vital that Ministers do everything possible to ensure that frontline health and care workers, who are more exposed to the virus, are fully protected.

Healthcare staff deaths are now estimated to be approaching 1,000. That is tragic. We know that our frontline workers face higher risk. During the surge in cases last month, the British Medical Association reported that more than 46,000 hospital staff were off sick with covid-19 or self-isolating. A survey conducted by the *Nursing Times* during the last two weeks of January found that 94% of nurses who work shifts reported that they were short-staffed due to similar absences. We support calls from the BMA and the Royal College of Nursing to urgently review PPE guidance and increase stockpiles of high-grade PPE such as FFP3 masks for all frontline NHS employees. I hope the Minister can update us on what plans the Government have to ensure that health and social care staff are fully protected.

Finally, we need a plan for staff to address what comes next. Just as the nation needs a recovery plan, the NHS workforce needs one too. We must not forget that we entered this crisis with a record 100,000 vacancies in the NHS. What I hear from staff, who have now been working flat out for a year, is that they desperately need a break, and they need a tangible demonstration that their efforts are truly valued. The NHS rightly has a special place in the hearts of the people of this country, but without the staff, the NHS ceases to exist. That is

why we need to recognise that we cannot keep dipping into that well of good will, and that at some point, NHS workers need cherishing as much as the institution itself.

I cannot mention PPE without briefly addressing last week's High Court ruling that the Government had acted unlawfully by failing to publish details of covid-related contracts. Why has the Secretary of State not come to Parliament to explain himself? Is breaking the law such a common occurrence in Government nowadays that it does not warrant an explanation from those responsible? The Government's approach to procurement during the pandemic has been marred by a toxic mix of misspending and cronyism. We all understand that the Department was and is dealing with many pressing issues, but transparency is important, and accountability matters. Of course, we need to remember why there was such a rush to get PPE in the first place—it was because the Government had ignored the warnings and allowed stockpiles to run down. The pandemic has been used too often as an excuse for standards to slip, but it really should not need saying that transparency goes hand in hand with good government.

Another area where we need greater transparency is the Government's general response to the pandemic to date. With the highest number of deaths in Europe, those in power now need to answer why that has been the case, because such a grim death toll was not inevitable. If it is the right time to undergo an expensive and disruptive reorganisation of the NHS, it is also the right time to have the inquiry into covid that the Prime Minister promised more than six months ago. The families of the deceased deserve answers, and we all need to know that lessons have been learned and that the same mistakes will not be made again. If we look at what has happened so far, we can see that there has been a tragic failure to learn the right lessons. That is why what we have heard from the Prime Minister today matters, because we are not out of the woods yet. Infection rates, though they are reducing, remain high; there are more people in hospital now than there were at the start of the second lockdown; and there are still more than 1,000 people being admitted to hospital every single day. So, what we do next, when we do it and how we do it remains critical.

The Opposition have been clear all along about the importance of following the science. We know where not following the science takes us: it leads to the worst death rate and the deepest recession in Europe. It leads to the farce of the Prime Minister refusing to cancel Christmas plans, only to U-turn three days later, and it leads to the shambles of children returning to school for one day, only to find it closed the next. We know that the virus thrives on delay and dither. As we approach a year of life under restrictions, any ambiguity over when, where, why and how the restrictions will be eased in the coming weeks and months is just as big a threat as the virus itself.

Before I conclude, I just want to say a bit about test and trace. We did not hear anything new from the Prime Minister on that today, but it nevertheless remains a vital part of the pandemic response. We need to remind ourselves that the number of new cases is still above 10,000 each day, and that every day thousands more people are required to self-isolate. For this lockdown truly to be the last, we need to continue to cut transmission

[Justin Madders]

chains and the spread of the virus, so this continuing blind spot when it comes to supporting people to self-isolate is as baffling as it is wrong.

When we first came out of lockdown, the scientific advice repeatedly stated that the easing of restrictions would work only if there was a fully functioning test and trace system in place. That was true last year and it is still true today. We still do not have all test results back within 24 hours, as the Prime Minister promised would happen last June, but perhaps most important are the continued low compliance rates with self-isolation. The Government have known for many months that the lack of financial support to those self-isolating has resulted in extremely low adherence rates. Surveys between March and August last year found that only 11% of people in the UK notified as having been in recent close contact with a confirmed case did not leave their home. That figure has improved a little recently, but it is still well below where it needs to be.

Around a quarter of employers will only pay statutory sick pay for such an absence. The Secretary of State has previously said that he could not survive on statutory sick pay, so we should not be surprised when others cannot do so either. We also know that seven in 10 applicants are not receiving self-isolation payments from councils, with one in four councils rejecting 90% of applications. They are rejecting them not because there is no need but because the rules have been so tightly drawn that seven out of eight people do not qualify for a payment under Government rules. When Dido Harding herself says that people are not self-isolating because they find it very difficult, a huge question needs to be answered about why the Government have still not acted to rectify this.

Last month, the Government announced more cash for councils for self-isolation payments, but that was to last until the end of March, and actually the amount handed out was equivalent to one day's-worth of people testing positive. That is clearly not enough, and what about after March? We need confirmation of how much support will continue to enable people to self-isolate after that date. Following reports in *The Independent* late last week that some people working for the NHS through private contractors, such as cleaners, porters and kitchen staff, were being denied full sick pay for covid-related absences because of the removal of supply relief, we need a commitment that this will be investigated urgently and that the direction of travel will be reversed so that everyone in the NHS is properly supported. The Government should be setting an example here, not leading a race to the bottom. On wider financial support, where is the road map for businesses that will still be operating under restrictions for many months to come? We know that the Budget is next week, but they need clarity and support now.

In conclusion, what the Prime Minister announced today has to be the last time the word "lockdown" passes his lips. There must be no more false dawns and no more boom and bust. With this road map, relaxations should now be clear and notified to the affected parties in advance, but also approved by this place in advance. There should be no more muddle between guidance and laws; no more regulations published minutes before they become law; no more businesses having to throw

away thousands of pounds-worth of stock because decisions are reversed at a moment's notice; no more of the stop-go cycle; and no more hopeless optimism followed by a hasty retreat. This time really has to be the last time. The vaccine has given us hope. It has given us a route out of this. With a year's experience of the virus and with multiple vaccines on the way, there can be no excuse for failure this time. The Prime Minister has said that he wants the road map to be a one-way ticket. I hope he is right. We all want him to be right, but if he gets it wrong, he should expect nothing less than a one-way ticket to the jobcentre.

6.29 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome my good friend the Minister's remarks. The Prime Minister was quite right to say in his statement that there is no credible road map to zero-covid Britain, and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who speaks for the Opposition, was right to say that this time has to be the last time—that is to say, this must be the last lockdown—so we need to explore with the public what that means.

In 2014-15, we lost 28,000 people to seasonal flu. Every year, we accept 78,000 deaths from the effects of smoking, but we do not seriously contemplate banning smoking despite the awful toll it takes. If there is no credible road map to zero covid, we need to explore with the public how many deaths every year they are prepared to accept from the virus and, potentially, others too. I do not know the answer to that, but perhaps the figures of 28,000 and 78,000 begin to give us some clue as to the parameters within which we can have that terrible, awful conversation. I do not envy my hon. Friend the Minister and his colleagues in their position as decision makers in this process.

We should never waste a crisis. May I commend Ministers for trying to reboot public health at pace and very effectively? We need to prepare for the next crisis now, because this virus almost certainly will not be the last one. We need to start working up a workforce that will do vaccination in the future as the virus changes and evolves, perhaps capitalising on those NHS returnees who have done the courses mandated and done the paperwork but have yet to be called up. We need to maintain them on the books, as it were, because we will probably need them in the future.

I welcome the lifting of the lockdown. My only question is one of pace. Immunity is like a muscle or a brain cell: it improves with work, and if we do not use it we lose it. Circulation of virus in the vaccinated population will enhance immunity, and I worry that if we are too cautious in lifting lockdown once the great bulk of the population at risk is vaccinated, we will be more vulnerable than we need to be as we re-enter the high-risk winter season. The data on cases and deaths published today on gov.uk is unexpectedly good, and we should celebrate that, but will my hon. Friend review the dates cited today if the data support that?

Finally, I very much welcome the extra money my hon. Friend has provided for research into vaccines in February. It is most welcome. We may find that therapeutics—treating people who are seriously ill with the virus—turns out to be just as important in fighting the virus as immunisation.

6.32 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: As we move into the second year of covid, and despite still being in lockdown, there are key positives to be celebrated. The vaccine roll-out is progressing quickly, and staff in all four national health services should be congratulated, along with the Army, which has provided logistical expertise, and the thousands of volunteers who have helped to ensure the safety and organisation of vaccination centres. Vaccine uptake has been way above expectations and, with the hope that vaccination will prevent viral transmission as well as protecting the recipient, everyone who rolls up their sleeve is contributing to the fight against the pandemic. However, concerns remain about lower vaccine uptake among certain groups, including some who are particularly vulnerable to covid, such as BAME communities. Anyone offered the vaccine should take up their appointment. If they have questions, there is information on the NHS websites, or they can ask their local GP practice.

Until now, any increase in covid cases has led to an inevitable rise in hospitalisation and deaths just a few weeks later, but as more vulnerable groups are vaccinated, that is starting to change. We are already seeing the benefit to those who were vaccinated first in Scotland. An analysis of over 1 million vaccine recipients by Public Health Scotland has today revealed a reduction in hospitalisation of between 85% and 94% for the two vaccines. Owing to its integrated structure, Scotland's NHS was able to get permission from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency to deliver the Pfizer vaccine to all elderly care homes from 13 December. That has led to a 62% drop in deaths among residents throughout January. That dramatic fall will, we hope, be replicated in data across the rest of the UK in just the coming weeks.

As the Prime Minister has highlighted, one possible threat to the success of the vaccination programme would be the importation of a more vaccine-resistant variant, such as that which has arisen in South Africa and has already been shown to be resistant to antibodies from those who have recovered from covid. This threat makes it inexplicable that when the UK Government have finally decided to set up monitored border quarantine, it is on such a limited basis—so much for following the science! There should be mandatory quarantine for arrivals from all countries, as there is nothing to prevent someone from travelling from South Africa or Brazil via a third country. The South African variant is already present in at least 35 other countries and new variants could be evolving as we speak. The Government's suggestion that people will be able to travel abroad for summer holidays seems to be courting danger, as the populations of many countries will not be vaccinated and therefore pose an increased risk that holidaymakers would bring back new variants; surely this is a sacrifice we could all accept if it allowed children to be in school and our domestic economy to open up. This measure must, however, be combined with support for the aviation, aerospace and international tourism sectors.

On the Prime Minister's road map out of lockdown, I welcomed the suggestion that decisions would be based on data rather than dates, but he then proceeded to announce a whole list of dates. Although it is good to see cases falling so dramatically across the UK, from almost 60,000 a day to just over 11,000 a day, case levels are still more than double what they were when SAGE

called for a lockdown on 21 September. The number of covid patients in hospital is 10 times what it was last September and only just dropped below the peak of the first wave last week.

While Scotland has maintained lower case levels throughout the second and third waves, progress in all four nations is slowing, and this is thought to be due to the greater infectiousness of the B117 Kent variant. Thankfully, this variant appears to be just as sensitive to the immune response induced by current vaccines, but every time the virus spreads and replicates itself, there is an opportunity for mutation and the risk of a problematic domestic variant emerging, including one that might be resistant to our current vaccines. The UK has already faced three waves of covid and three lockdowns, and it is important that current restrictions remain until case levels have been driven low enough to give the vaccine programme a chance to succeed and health services time to recover. It is not a matter of setting the economy against public health; it is through stopping community spread that we would be able to get our domestic economy and society back up and running.

Once covid levels have been brought down, it is critical to have an effective system to test, trace and isolate those who could be carrying the virus, in order to keep control of the outbreak. Unfortunately, one in eight cases are still not being reached by NHS Test and Trace, and surveys suggest that as few as one in three people are isolating when required. The commonest reason is that they cannot afford to lose their income, yet more than half of those applying for the Government's support payment are being turned down, which makes it very unlikely that they would then isolate. The Government need to widen the eligibility criteria and review the level of payment, which is less than the minimum wage. It is in everyone's interest to ensure that those who could be carrying the virus isolate so we avoid onward spread. All these measures carry a cost, but when we see the flourishing domestic economies of the countries that acted quickly and stringently last year, we can see the cost of not taking action, both in lives and in economic damage.

6.39 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We craved a measure of urgency and what we got was caution. We have been told that the plan is to be driven by data. What data? From the very start, we were informed that the main effort—the aim—was to deliver the saving of lives by protecting the NHS, so the key data must be a level of hospital admissions with which the NHS can cope efficiently and effectively. But since then, we have seen mission creep to a level of daily infections, and the number of 1,000 a day has been touted. Given the level of testing and the ambition for even greater testing, were covid-19 to disappear tonight off the face of the earth, we would still have more positive test results tomorrow, as a consequence of even the most conservative estimate of false positives, that would prevent us from lifting the restrictions on that day.

The Minister has mentioned the unpredictability of the disease. We just heard a dissertation on that from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). In the ordinary course of events, a virus that is successful becomes more benign. The new variants—the ones that succeed—do not send their sufferers to bed. They keep

[Sir Desmond Swayne]

them up and about, spreading it, but a lockdown reverses the terms of trade. The successful variant is the one that can get through the social distancing, is more potent and will get its sufferer into hospital, where there are much greater opportunities for spread. Anyone who is concerned about new variants should join us who are conscious of the need for urgency with respect to the huge economic and social costs of this lockdown, and join us because of the scientific urgency of getting the lockdown lifted as well.

6.41 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I have a great deal of sympathy with what my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) just said. I applaud the Government and everybody who has been involved in this incredible vaccine roll-out programme. It really is world leading and is going to make a huge difference in tackling the coronavirus. However, I urge colleagues in Government to think very broadly about this pandemic.

I want to give three examples from my constituency case load. First, businesses have been supported, as have jobs, but the reality is that businesses cannot survive for much longer. I am thinking of the mental health of business owners, their personal savings, their families, the people that they have had to get rid of because they cannot keep them on furlough any longer—this cannot continue. There are huge costs not only in terms of the financial implications, but of their balance sheets—the constant roll-over of bank interest rates and so on, which has long-term implications for their prospects as a business.

Secondly, schoolchildren have already fallen so far behind. I had a constituency roundtable with headteachers, who were saying to me that it is always the same children. The ones who have great parents at home, getting them to keep working in spite of it all, will manage. It is those who do not have either the devices at home or the parental input who are really going to suffer and struggle, and not just this year or this month, but for years to come. It is existentially threatening to their lives.

The third point I want to make is about dementia sufferers. Someone very close to me has dementia and it has really destroyed their life. When it comes to people with dementia, we try to give them social input. We try to give them something to look forward to and try to keep them stimulated, and we are just not doing that. We are talking about one person to hold their hand—that is just not good enough. We have to think outside the box and look at what more we can do to help people to catch up right across all our country, all our nation.

I want to finish with an absolute plea to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to make sure this place comes back, because I am hearing from hon. Friends and colleagues across the Chamber about the vital need to keep scrutinising the Government, particularly as we come out of lockdown. We cannot be date-driven; we have to be data-driven. We need to keep talking about the harm that is being caused by the lockdown so that we get the balance right between saving people's lives from covid and saving their lives from other things that are not covid but are related to covid.

6.44 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the passionate contribution of the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom).

I am conscious that the debate this evening has been opened by a Health Minister and, I understand, will be concluded by the Paymaster General, and the case I want to raise is connected to the support offered by the Government for businesses, particularly the furlough scheme. I have been wanting to raise this case for some weeks now.

Staff mainly at two venues in Glasgow, Blue Dog and Ad Lib, have not had any furlough payments since October last year because there is an issue between the business and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs that has so far been unresolved. Across these two venues and others there are up to 200 people who have had no income at all—nothing—since October.

I have been in correspondence with the permanent secretary and chief executive at HMRC and the Department for Work and Pensions to try to get the staff some state support, because at the minute the staff's real-time information—their live tax information—shows them as though they were still being paid as normal when HMRC and the DWP know that that is not the case, and that means they are not eligible to receive universal credit.

May I plead with the Minister or the Paymaster General to please look at this case and get it resolved, as 200 low-paid bar workers in Glasgow really need it resolved? On the question of who is at fault, whether the business owners or HMRC, there will be plenty to say in future; all I want to get across to Government tonight is that these staff members really need an intervention in their case.

It has got so bad that the staff of Blue Dog and Ad Lib in Glasgow have had to start crowdfunding from fellow bar workers in order to at least have some money to pay bills that keep on coming, and I want to end my remarks by repeating something that one of the staff put on his Facebook page this weekend. John Taay Russell had this to say:

"I...don't even know what to do anymore. I'm fighting tooth and nail...mentally I am defeated...I find myself in a carousel of depression and self loathing,"

but

"Bills keep coming, Rent needs paid".

So I am pleading with Ministers: please look at this case in detail; please get these individuals the financial support they are entitled to and so desperately, desperately need.

6.47 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): The fact that the Prime Minister was able to make his statement today is principally down to the extraordinary achievement of multiple vaccines being rolled out right across the country to the whole adult population by the summer. It is a scientific landmark, but also an historic achievement by the NHS, by pharmacists, by volunteers and not least by Ministers and their officials and the vaccine taskforce. We are immensely grateful to them.

The Prime Minister is absolutely right to be, as he put it,

"driven by the data rather than by dates",

so I was a little surprised that dates featured very prominently in his statement today. These dates were described as “not before dates”: not before, for example, 29 March will it be possible to play outdoor sports; shops and hairdressers and gyms will be open not before 12 April; restaurants and hotels will not be open before the date of 17 May; and full wedding ceremonies will not be allowed before the date of 21 June. I understand that everyone in the industries affected craves certainty, but it may just be that pubs, restaurant owners, hairdressers and the travel industry would be perfectly willing to accept an earlier ability to trade if the data allowed it.

The evidence that the Science and Technology Committee took from leading scientists just last week, the same scientists who are advising the Government, was that the data are all pointing in the right direction. Professor Woolhouse of Edinburgh said that

“if you are driven by the data and not by dates, right now you should be looking at earlier unlocking because the data are so good.”

Just this lunchtime, Professor Andrew Hayward, professor of infectious disease and epidemiology at University College London, said that if we are driven by the data, then we need to be prepared, if things are better than expected, that we may be able to release faster than we expect. I therefore say to the Minister that I hope the Government, in adopting this plan, will not be inadvertently a prisoner of the plan.

During the weeks ahead, vast amounts of data will be available to the Government and to their advisers. Following the data is the right policy, and I hope that that is exactly what they will do.

6.50 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab) [V]: Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure you will agree that the success of the vaccine roll-out has been a beacon of hope at the darkest of times. However, as of 11 February of this year, when 88% of white people aged over 70 had received the first dose, just 57% of black people had been jabbed, despite being twice as likely to get covid-19. People from south Asian communities are also more at risk, yet vaccine coverage for them was 15% lower than for white people. Shockingly, ethnicity has so far been the biggest factor in determining the likelihood of someone receiving a vaccine if they have been offered one.

As shocking as that has been, it should not come as a surprise to anyone in the House. In a speech to the Chamber last November, I pointed out that of those taking part in vaccine trials just 0.5% were from BAME backgrounds, especially black African and Caribbean backgrounds, with 4% from Asian communities. I warned of the danger that that trend could be replicated in a vaccine roll-out and urged rapid action to improve confidence in the vaccine. Unfortunately, my worst fears have been realised. I have been volunteering at a vaccination centre in Camden in my constituency. Of the hundreds of people coming in for a jab, I could count the number of people from BAME communities on one hand, despite the fact that 35% of Camden’s population is BAME.

Last year, I urged the Government to lead a co-ordinated, comprehensive effort to tackle anti-vaccine misinformation and build confidence, involving BAME health workers, leaders, community organisations and charities, and using communication channels that BAME people are

more likely to use and trust. Sadly, that has not happened on the scale that is necessary. It has been largely left to local communities to do that engagement.

As the Prime Minister set out today, one of the conditions for easing lockdown is the successful roll-out of the vaccination programme. I am personally very worried about the potential consequences of relaxing lockdown on the basis of positive top-line figures on vaccination that mask very low take-up in some groups of the community. If restrictions are relaxed before there is widespread vaccine coverage, there is a serious danger that the virus could rip through BAME communities where the likelihood of infection and death from covid is already much higher.

I have a few questions for the Minister. Are the Government taking into account the ethnic breakdown of vaccination data in determining whether lockdown will be lifted? Why, when we have been warning about it for months, was the UK’s vaccine take-up plan published only this month? Why are MPs being contacted only now about how they can help to tackle misinformation? What specific additional support will be available for councils to run programmes to tackle misinformation among BAME communities? Which BAME community leaders—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I have allowed the hon. Lady rather longer than her three minutes, but I am afraid I have to stop her now.

6.54 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I was more content with today’s statement than I feared I might be. As I said to the Prime Minister earlier, the return of schools is a hallelujah moment for me and for many parents; the Government have done the right thing there. Primary for me in the Prime Minister’s statement was the line:

“There is no credible route to a zero-covid Britain or indeed a zero-covid world.”

This is what I do not get. We hear people say all the time, “It must be the last covid-19 lockdown. We don’t want to go back.” Well, of course we do not want to go back. Nobody wants to do that, but what am I missing here? In its analysis of covid deaths, the plan, on page 14, talks about 88% of cohorts 1 to 4. Then it mentions a further 11%, which means that 99% of deaths are in cohorts 1 to 9, so how could we go back? We have heard today about the efficacy of the vaccines, which is awesome. Compared with the flu vaccine, it is incredibly good. We have heard about the impact on transmissibility, which seems to be good as well. When the Paymaster General sums up, can she please explain what I am missing here?

On the 99% figure, how can I justify to my constituents what it says on page 39 of today’s road map, which is that there will be no legal limits on social contact, but that will happen no earlier than 21 June? We will have vaccinated cohorts 1 to 9, the 99%, by the middle of April, so by the end of April that will have taken effect and they will be protected. Look, I am open to the argument. I think I am a reasonable fellow, but surely the onus is on the Government to justify their restrictions—those in law anyway—after the end of April.

Finally, I agree with Sir Patrick Vallance, the chief scientific adviser, when he said that covid will be with us forever. The truth, therefore, is that so will infections

[*Steve Brine*]

and so will hospitalisations, and that, sadly, it will take people before their time—it may take me. We have to accept that the human condition includes mortality. That is really hard. When I was Public Health Minister, I found it hard that 22,000 people lost their lives to influenza. It was really hard when my own father passed away from pancreatic cancer three days after the last general election, but it was true. Let us be driven by the data, absolutely, let us be cautious, yes, and let us produce a release that is irreversible, but let us produce one that is irreversible because we are being honest with the British public, not because we are chasing a world without covid, which, as the Prime Minister rightly said, can never be.

6.57 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab) [V]: I wish to raise two very pressing issues in the debate this evening. Both are very close to my heart and affect many of my constituents. For months, stories have been coming out of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency of wholly unacceptable working conditions in the buildings in Swansea East. I have had so many concerns raised with me by my constituents, and each and every one of them ends with, “Please don’t mention my name.” When I ask them why, they just describe a fear. They say they do not want to be singled out—they do not want to be that person who has caused any trouble. For those who are employees of the DVLA and members of the Public and Commercial Services Union, a ballot paper on industrial action will have landed on their desks today. There is an obvious worry that the 2,000 or so DVLA workers who are already working from home might not think that this dispute concerns them, but indeed it does, because standing by their colleagues who have put themselves at risk by physically going on to Government premises is the very reason why this is so important.

It is also unacceptable that the Secretary of State for Transport and the chief executive of the DVLA have refused substantially to change their position and have blocked more staff from working from home. It is incumbent on them now to face up to their responsibilities and to look after their workers.

On another crucial matter, we have been told on a number of occasions that the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation is responsible for deciding the prioritisation of the groups receiving the vaccine. I have been generally supportive of that approach, but there seems to be a gaping hole in the groups being vaccinated. My constituent, the Rev. John Gillibrand, has contacted me as he is very, very worried about his son, Adam Gillibrand. Adam has a learning disability and lives in a care home. This care home is able to provide him with the extra support that he needs. Adam has challenging behaviour, and the associated strain that it would put on the NHS if he were to be taken ill is significant. As has been recently highlighted in the media—John was on “*Newsnight*” only last week—people with a learning disability are up to six times more likely to die from coronavirus. Those under the age of 34 are 30 times more likely to die than their peers. That is an extraordinary disparity that needs to be immediately addressed and remedied. What is so disappointing is that, earlier, the Prime Minister blundered through a non-answer on this issue, but real action needs to be taken.

I have today written to the Secretary of State for Health asking him to look at this issue as a matter of urgency for Adam Gillibrand and for all others with a learning disability.

7 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab) [V]: There are two or three points that I want to make very quickly tonight, after first thanking the extraordinary national health service team and the public health team in Birmingham, of Justin Varney, David Rosser and Paul Jennings, who meet with Birmingham MPs each week. The clarity of the information that they give and the quality of their leadership in our city are absolutely extraordinary.

The three quick points I want to add to this debate are these. First, it is now crucial that Ministers make available detailed ward-level data about vaccinations. As some people know, we have been fighting for this data in Birmingham for some time, and I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for working with me. The Secretary of State promised us the data back in about January. It was then made available to public health directors through the dashboards that they can see, but it was marked as restricted, which means they cannot share it. We have been able to get it into the public domain by putting it on the agenda in some preparatory work for the covid-19 committee that we have to set up, but it is really not good enough that we have to go this roundabout way to get crucial data published.

The reason this is so serious is that the data in Birmingham reveals a story of two cities, if not two nations: rich and poor. In the richest wards in Birmingham, we have vaccination rates that are over 90%; in the poorest wards, we have vaccination rates that are under 60%. We have a dramatically different vaccination uptake in the richest wards compared with the poorest wards. Underlining, underpinning and exacerbating this problem is the fact that our testing uptake has a similar pattern. In fact, the amount of testing in the richer wards is 60% greater than the testing in the poorer wards. Anecdotally, we have people who cannot afford to find out they have covid but happen to live in wards where the vaccination uptake is lowest. Cases are now concentrated in the poorest places, and the risk is that these poor places will languish in a kind of long covid for many more months than richer places. That opens the risk of a pandemic of disease now triggering a pandemic of poverty.

I call on Ministers today to please make sure that this data is more widely available, and for heaven’s sake start using our community pharmacies to start rolling out the vaccination programme in our poorest places. On big hubs and GPs, we do not have access to those kinds of services in the same way that the richer wards do. Viruses that evade a vaccine are viruses that continue to evolve, and no one is safe until everybody is safe. We need a different approach to vaccination roll-out, and we need it now.

7.3 pm

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con) [V]: Widely reported studies modelling the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on suicide rates have predicted dramatic increases, ranging up to 145%, with particular emphasis given to the effect of the pandemic on children and young people. Numerous

surveys have highlighted that their mental health has been disproportionately affected relative to that of older adults, with a corresponding increase in suicidal thoughts and self-harm. All of us will have to struggle with our own mental health to some degree or other during this time, but there are various known risk factors that can impact on mental health, such as depression, feelings of unattachment, loneliness, domestic violence, child neglect and abuse, unemployment and other financial insecurity.

When, almost a year ago, we entered lockdown across the globe, there was some degree of optimism that this would be a quick process and before too long we would return to normal. The lockdown went on a lot longer than people thought it would, but the weather slowly improved and there was a reasonable sense of optimism that kept people going. The November lockdown was announced as being short, with Christmas and the hope of meeting up with loved ones as a promised reward at the end, if possible.

The current lockdown, however, has been very different. The post-Christmas dark days that hit many people every year have just seemed too much to bear for some. Dark days and cold weather have limited the opportunity for outdoor exercise for many. The absence of support from family has gone on too long. Children are missing school friends, and parents are missing support, often struggling to work while home-schooling their children.

Let me be absolutely clear: I have no doubt whatever that this lockdown, like others before it, was needed, but so many people have paid a very high price. Mental health across the generations has been severely impacted. All too often, people are struggling to see a way forward. The Prime Minister has today set out the way forward, and I hugely welcome it, but will he assure the House that although we will all be happy to see a relaxation of the lockdowns where possible, he will be guided by the science and do all he can to ensure that this truly is the last lockdown?

7.5 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: As the Prime Minister unveils his road map for the end of lockdown measures, we have reached a critical juncture in our long fight with covid-19. What the public need most now is a cast-iron guarantee that no one will be left behind as the lockdown is eased, but as British businesses read in the papers that they will not be able to reopen for many months, they still have little idea of what financial support will be available to them after April. Many simply cannot wait until the Budget is delivered in March; they need clarity and certainty now. Last year countless jobs were needlessly lost because of the Chancellor's unnecessary delay in extending the furlough scheme. He must not make the same mistake again. That is why I urge him to heed the Labour party's call for an immediate extension to furlough, the business rates holiday and the reduction in VAT. It is also high time that the nearly 3 million British taxpayers excluded from accessing financial support get the help they need.

I implore the Education Secretary to engage constructively with the education sector over plans to reopen schools. One of the many great privileges of serving as a Member in this House is getting to meet educators and support staff working in colleges, schools and nurseries across my constituency. Their professionalism and commitment to the wellbeing of their students is

beyond doubt, and they know better than any of us how important it is to have children back in their classrooms. But instead of working alongside the teaching profession, Ministers too often dismiss the legitimate concerns of the teaching unions and attack educators for undermining the welfare of the very pupils they have dedicated their professional lives to—and they do so while failing to ensure that every student has access to broadband and an appropriate digital device at home.

Time is fast running out for the Government to put in place a credible plan for school reopening. The Education Secretary must sit down with the teaching unions and ensure that the appropriate measures are in place to ensure a safe return to classrooms, including by ensuring that all school staff are vaccinated and that school buildings have effective filtration and ventilation programmes in place.

The Government should do everything in their power to speed up the roll-out of the vaccine. The announcement that every adult will get the jab by August is undoubtedly welcome, and I am sure that I will be joined by Members from across the House in applauding the hard work and determination of the NHS staff and volunteers who have made the vaccine roll-out such a success so far, but last week the chief executive officer of the NHS said that we could double the rate of vaccinations if only we had sufficient supply. We need to make that happen. We also need to ensure that vaccination is easily accessible to everyone by having vaccination centres in every local community and in places of worship, and by making use of mobile vaccinations and community pharmacists.

The Government's shambolic handling of the pandemic has left the UK facing one of the highest death tolls and the deepest recession of any advanced economy. We desperately need the Prime Minister to learn from his many mistakes and to ensure that our nation is not plunged into a fourth national lockdown.

7.9 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab) [V]: Rhondda Cynon Taf, the local authority within which my constituency of Cynon Valley is located, has the third highest covid death rate in the UK. This stark fact fills me with sadness. I am sad when I think about all the lives in my community that have been lost to this deadly virus. Behind the statistics are people who lived in, worked in and contributed to our valley in so many ways. Their deaths were needless and avoidable, and that makes me angry.

I am angry at the ever-widening inequality that is the root cause of the high death toll. The south Wales valleys have suffered decades of neglect and hardship as a result of the neoliberal agenda ruthlessly pursued by consecutive UK Governments. The demise of the coal industry in the 1980s was followed by a period of high unemployment, poverty, health problems and inequality. We have never been able or enabled to recover from this position.

I am angry that the past 11 years of Tory Government, with their careless attitude and austerity policies, have exacerbated poverty and inequality in my local authority, which has been stripped of £90 million during this period. My local authority is the fourth most deprived in Wales, with a quarter of people living in poverty and even higher rates of child poverty. The covid pandemic has exacerbated the hardship and suffering of people in my constituency.

[Beth Winter]

I am angry that this Tory Government pay lip service to clapping for key workers, many of whom are on the minimum wage, have to use food banks to manage and are on zero-hours contracts. Our local economy is dominated by low-skilled, low-waged, insecure employment.

I am angry that the health and safety of DVLA workers in Swansea was put at risk during this pandemic. How could the Government let that happen? I support the PCS ballot and urge workers to vote yes.

We must now look at how we run our society and invest in the areas that have been hardest hit. I am optimistic neither that this Government will get it right, nor that they understand the problems that my constituents face. We need a benefits system that gives people security and dignity, not one that includes one of the worst sickness benefit rates in Europe. We need investment in infrastructure projects such as those that can provide green energy and broadband initiatives—projects that provide well-paid jobs and give young people a future in their home communities. The Welsh Government need funding to enable them to carry out such initiatives. We should not have to wait on the vagaries of a Tory Government to decide how and when Wales gets its fair share of funding, through either the Barnett formula or the shared prosperity fund.

We need an end to tax evasion and avoidance by the rich, a windfall tax on covid profits, and community wealth projects with fair work and pay, which put money back in the pockets of our community rather than its being hidden away in offshore bank accounts. We need policies that ease the burden of debt that so many will face. I am determined to challenge the gross inequalities that exist so that we do not end up with the poorest paying the greatest price every time. My experience in my community tells me that there is an appetite for doing things differently, and that fills me with hope.

7.12 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con) [V]: I wish to start by saying some words of praise for Ministers and, indeed, everyone involved in the vaccination programme. It has been an extraordinary achievement and put us fully on the path back to recovery as a nation. But that is why I am, frankly, disappointed by what I have heard today. The path set out this afternoon is too tentative and does not adequately take into account the impact of this pandemic on our society as a whole. We needed to do more, quicker. We needed to identify those things that are the lowest risk and allow them to start again now. We needed to give those people, particularly among the younger generation, whose mental health is under intense strain or whose business prospects and job prospects seem hopeless the most rapid safe path back to normality.

For example, there is virtually no evidence that the virus transmits easily outdoors, so why do we need to wait a month before a group of four or six people can go for a walk in the park? Why do we need to wait a month before a small group of people can start to play outdoor sports again? What difference does it really make if someone drives 50 miles for a walk with a relative, as long as it is outdoors?

I have argued all along that the strategy to reopen should be based on a hard-nosed assessment of risk. We know that the virus transmits most seriously in a small

number of settings—in hospitals, care homes, schools, workplaces and indoors in the home in particular—but it does not transmit easily in the park, on the beach, on a tennis court or in the hills, so why are we not unlocking the great outdoors now to ease the pressures on people and give them more space in their lives so that they can start to rebuild their mental strength, which has been through such difficult times? Where is the risk in letting pubs open their gardens again for Easter, or zoos open their outdoor areas to visitors, and start to rebuild their finances; or in a promise today to reopen air corridors to low-risk countries later in the spring, rather than a tentative review? A trading nation cannot close its borders indefinitely. However good the furlough scheme may be, the longer we wait to reopen, the fewer businesses and jobs will be there when that day comes.

This Government, the Prime Minister, his team and the Health Secretary have done an extraordinary job in getting us to where we are in vaccinations, but this country and this Government must not blow that now with an approach that takes caution beyond common sense. Lord Hague was right in saying at the weekend that when the top nine groups have had their jabs, we should be unlocking almost everything, but where we know the risks are low, we should be unlocking now.

7.15 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP [V]): I welcome the fact that after a long, hard winter, there are now grounds for cautious optimism. However, there is more to do to make sure that a return to some sort of normality is sustainable and that as many jobs and businesses as possible are supported through to that new normality.

On the first point—sustainability—I repeat my party's call for the UK Government to take stronger measures at the border. The overwhelming evidence is that as we manage to get domestic transmission under control, it becomes much more important, not less, to stop receiving the virus, including new strains from abroad. While the introduction of supervised quarantine for red list country arrivals was better than nothing, it is fair to say that almost everyone and their dog knows that such a restricted, piecemeal approach does not go far enough and does not make sense for a host of reasons. We also know that almost three in four people across the whole of the UK prefer the comprehensive Scottish Government rules for hotel quarantine to the weaker Westminster approach taken to arrivals in England. I ask the UK Government to listen to the Scottish Government, to public opinion and to the scientific evidence.

On the second issue—protecting jobs and businesses—I join my colleagues in stating that it is imperative that the various economic and social security support schemes are extended again, and the gaps in support comprehensively highlighted by the all-party parliamentary group and campaigners must be filled now by the Chancellor in his Budget.

I will finish by raising with the Paymaster General the specific issues faced by one type of business—kennels and catteries, and other animal care businesses. Many such businesses are struggling to survive, including local operators I have been speaking to in Cumbernauld, who normally have a customer base of over 1,000, but who now have, and will have in the months ahead, next

to no business. It is the same for businesses across the UK. Intrinsically linked to the tourism and hospitality industries, they are not being supported as if they were part of that sector—for example, there is no reduction in VAT. Fixing that so that these businesses get the same support as other tourism businesses would be a small move for the Treasury, but a massive help to the businesses.

I hope a Treasury Minister will be willing to speak to me and to business owners about this. It may seem a niche issue now, but it will not some time down the line, when we open up again and can finally take holidays at home and abroad, but find that there is nowhere to put all our newly purchased cats and dogs.

7.18 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con) [V]: I begin by paying tribute to the NHS here in Buckinghamshire. Under quite extraordinary pressure, staff have continually risen to the challenge, and we should all be very proud of them.

We asked the Government for a road to recovery starting on 8 March, and I am pleased that they have now set it out, but the pace of change announced today will be a hammer blow for aviation, for pubs, restaurants, hotels, gyms and pools, and for the arts establishment. Once again, it seems to be modelling, not data, which is driving the Government's decisions, even though, time and again, modelling used for serious covid decisions has been taken apart retrospectively. One of the four models used by the Government to illustrate the need for the second national lockdown predicted 1,000 deaths on 1 November, the day after it was presented to the public, when the actual number of deaths that day was just over 200. It has been reported that the road map is based on the new Imperial College modelling of the vaccine roll-out. Of course, as I know as a software engineer, what you put into a model determines what you get out of it. Well, the modellers have assumed that the uptake of vaccines for all groups will be 85%, when actually it has been 90%. They assume that there will be a drop in the uptake of the second dose of the vaccine to 75%, without any evidence. They assume that the vaccine's efficacy in protecting against the risk of infection is 48% after one dose and 60% after two doses for both vaccines that we have available, but data from Public Health England shows that one dose reduces the risk of infection by more than 70%, rising to 85% after the second dose. These models really must be improved. I have said time and again that we need to drive up the standard of modelling. We need to introduce competitive expert advice with red team challenge, because experts are only human and we have been asking the impossible of them in the context of the challenges that they face.

I have said time and again that we need a new public health Act to learn from this crisis and make sure that the harms and the benefits of Government policy are properly assessed and that Parliament regularly has amendable motions before it. Thank goodness that in this document the Government have begun to acknowledge the socioeconomic cost of restrictions. The Government make it very clear that violent crime and drug addiction have gone up and that wellbeing has come down, with more anxiety and depression. They have been clear that the hardest hit have been the young, females, ethnic minorities and the lower-paid. That is why we need a new public health Act to ensure that our Parliament is

properly informed so that never again do we impose these measures without knowing whether they will do more harm than good.

7.21 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab) [V]: I would like to cover three areas: inequality, covid-secure workplaces, and, briefly, cancer services, which I raised with the Prime Minister during his statement this afternoon.

I was rather concerned, following the Prime Minister's statement, that the Government may not have learned the lessons from their previous mistakes, in that there is a direct and undeniable correlation between covid-19 and inequality. The many heat maps that have been published over the past year showing covid infections, hospitalisations and fatalities have illustrated the close correlation between covid prevalence and areas of deprivation and high inequality. Indeed, in recent days a worrying trend has emerged of a high covid infection rate in some of the communities that I represent in the Easington constituency. While infection rates across County Durham continue to fall, there are higher rates in Peterlee East and Horden compared with other areas.

One reason is that in many cases the poorest have no option but to continue to work, even in conditions that are not covid secure. Those in insecure employment or on zero-hours contracts—agency workers, for example—do not have the finances or security that they need to self-isolate. The poorest are facing greater poverty if the Government do not listen to the likes of my own trade union, Unite, which is calling for them to retain the £20 uplift in universal credit and for the uplift to be extended to the legacy benefits—a call supported by many organisations, including the charity, Macmillan Cancer Support. Remarkably, there are many instances of workplaces that staff believe are still not covid secure. PCS union members at the DVLA headquarters in Swansea are balloting for strike action today after senior managers and ministers, some of whom appeared before the Transport Committee, which I serve on, have consistently refused to listen to their concerns. This is despite the fact that there have been over 550 covid cases in recent months and we have seen the tragic death from covid of one staff member.

We need to change our approach to cancer services and the need for a dedicated cancer budget. The cancer backlog after the first wave could be 50,000 patients, and we could emerge from the pandemic with a backlog of 100,000. We all want a safe and orderly return to normal, but one of the biggest obstacles throughout this pandemic has been the Government's inability to follow the science and their turning a deaf ear to criticism.

7.24 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab) [V]: As my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) said, our local authority of Rhondda Cynon Taf is one of the areas hit hardest by the coronavirus pandemic. In Tonyrefail West, where I was born and went to school, and where I still live, the death rate from this horrible virus is one of the highest in the UK. My community has been torn apart; sadly, everyone knows someone who has died or lost a loved one to this virus. Cruelly, we have not been able to grieve or come together to remember those we have lost as a community, but we will.

[Alex Davies-Jones]

I know that my community is not alone in that, and I know that it is not happening because people in Tonyrefail, Pontypridd and RCT are less likely to follow the rules. Like everywhere else, the vast majority of people are making huge sacrifices to follow the rules to keep themselves, their loved ones and their community safe, but we have an ageing population and, sadly, people are more likely to be living with ill health than in other parts of the country. People are less likely to own a car and, more importantly, people across RCT are more likely to be key workers in jobs that they are unable to do from home. Many of those jobs are low paid, and many people are on zero-hours contracts and face major financial hardships if they have to miss work.

What we are seeing in communities such as mine is the legacy of over a decade of austerity and long-term Tory disinterest. At Prime Minister's Question Time recently, the Prime Minister referred to the fantastic aviation industry in south Wales, but without sector-specific support, which I and colleagues across the House have been calling for for nearly a year now, that industry and those businesses are simply unable to survive. In my constituency, we are losing excellent expertise—hundreds of jobs at GE Aviation in Nantgarw and at British Airways in Llantrisant.

The Government have still not confirmed whether they will go through with their plan to cut universal credit by £20 a week either. That is yet another example of this Government being completely out of touch with the basic needs of millions of families across the UK and turning a blind eye to opportunities to help, just as they have with the more than 3 million people who have been excluded from any UK Government support altogether.

For new parents, too, this Government need to act. I can fully imagine how difficult it must have been to raise a newborn in these circumstances. Some new mothers have been excluded from furlough payments and have struggled to get childcare, forcing them to quit their job or to take unpaid leave in order to cope.

There is light at the end of the tunnel. There is no doubt that the vaccine roll-out across the country has been phenomenal, not least here in Wales; we became the first nation in the UK to vaccinate the top four priority groups. I thank each and every person—NHS staff, volunteers and service personnel—who worked round the clock to make that happen. Communities such as mine have been hit hard by this deadly virus, and they need the Chancellor to do whatever it takes to help them get through this. They need him to act.

7.27 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): It was great to hear the Prime Minister say today that the Government's policy will continue to be based on data, not dates. It would have been wrong to give in to those who wanted a premature lifting of restrictions on the basis of the calendar rather than the available scientific data, but it would also be wrong to continue unnecessarily with restrictions if the data said that it was safe to lift them. If data is right in one direction, it has to be right in the other. I hope that there will be sufficient flexibility in

the mechanism that the Government have set out today to respond more quickly should the data continue to improve.

The strategy has always been clear. It has not been to drive covid deaths down to zero, because that would be ridiculous and out of step with everything we know about medical science and historical experience; it has been to stop the medical services becoming overwhelmed. As we see greater levels of immunisation, with a reduced risk of that happening, I suggest to my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General that that is the No. 1 basis on which we should make decisions.

Our vaccine results continue to be terrific. It is one of the best cases we can make for the Union of the United Kingdom that we have been able to buy and distribute vaccine across the whole country in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. There must be a lot of egg on a lot of Euro faces tonight, given the information we have about the AstraZeneca vaccine. It would perhaps be a source of some amusement even in this House, were it not so serious, that the idle chatter and uninformed comments from senior European politicians will undoubtedly have cost lives. We should be trying to get a vaccine dividend for the British people, given the success of our vaccine programme, to get back as quickly as we can to normal.

The NHS will face staffing issues, as we have to deal with not only the new vaccines but the second doses of vaccine at the same time, and I would like to hear from the Minister how we will deal with that. It is right for us to share vaccine with the developing world. It is not a case of altruism. In a world that is interconnected and interdependent, the longer the pandemic goes on, the more variants we will see, and therefore it is in our mutual self-interest to deal with it.

Finally, it is time to get Parliament back. The mechanisms we have had are better than no Parliament, and Mr Speaker and his staff deserve credit for that, but if it is good enough to get the schools as institutions back, it is good enough to get Parliament back. Three-minute monologues that are uninterruptible are not the same as the robust debate that we need.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Dr Fox: I will give way, almost reluctantly, to my hon. Friend.

Anthony Mangnall: Being in Parliament gives the opportunity for individuals to intervene in debates and have a more rigorous debate on these issues. Is that not a benefit to being here?

Dr Fox: Proving the point that show is always better than tell, my hon. Friend is exactly right. We have to not just hold the Government to account on the issues of the day but have genuine debate in Parliament about the whole range of issues that will become live once we start to get complete control over the covid pandemic.

It is time that we set out a programme for immunisation in Parliament for Members, Members' staff, our security staff, the catering staff and even the Lobby. On that subject, I am more than happy to volunteer my services, if for no other reason than that I have always believed it is fine to mix business with pleasure.

7.31 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: People with learning disabilities have been marginalised in health and care for decades. We know from the learning disability mortality review that people with learning disabilities have a life expectancy 20 years lower than the general public. Now we know that, during the pandemic, people with learning disabilities have been even more at risk. After adjusting for age, people with learning disabilities are six times more likely to die from covid than their peers. Despite that, the Government have not given people with learning disabilities the protection and support they need in the pandemic. It took months for people with Down's syndrome to be added to the clinically extremely vulnerable list, and Ministers still do not fully accept that people with learning disabilities are more vulnerable to covid than their peers.

Only those people with a severe or profound learning disability indicated on their GP record are currently eligible for a vaccine in cohort 6. A Public Health England report on deaths from covid in people with learning disabilities details the fact that GP records are not sufficient to reach all people with learning disabilities who are at risk. It said:

"The great majority of people recognised as having learning disabilities in schools are not recognised as such by health services in adulthood. Those missed... are known to have poor physical health, including higher rates of obesity and diabetes, putting them at increased risk of death from COVID-19."

This means that people may be being denied the vaccine they need because of a postcode lottery in medical record keeping. The learning disability mortality review programme report on covid deaths told us that deaths were not limited to people with severe or profound learning disabilities. Can the Minister tell us that the Government will update the vaccines delivery plan to make clear that all people with learning disabilities should get the vaccine as part of cohort 6?

It is also deeply worrying to hear that people with learning disabilities may have been denied life-saving medical treatment for no reason other than they have a learning disability. The Care Quality Commission found that inappropriate "do not resuscitate" orders may have led to potentially avoidable deaths during the first wave of the pandemic. That was rightly condemned, with both the CQC and NHS England making clear that "do not resuscitate" orders based solely on someone's learning disability should not be used, but there are reports that this practice has resumed. It is clear that the CQC does not have the powers it needs to address this, so will the Government agree to suspend all "do not resuscitate" orders applied to people with learning disabilities during the pandemic until a full review can be carried out? Access to healthcare and treatment is a human rights issue and an equality issue. It is past time that we took action to ensure that people with learning disabilities get the same access to the healthcare and treatment they need as their peers do.

7.34 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) [V]: I greatly welcome my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's statement today setting out a clear path as to how we end this national/international nightmare, but for some industries it will not end when it does for others, and I want to focus on the travel industry.

Nearly two pence in every pound spent in this country is spent in the travel industry, which employs almost a quarter of a million people. I was glad to hear the Prime Minister say today that we will help everybody for the duration of the pandemic, but for the travel industry the pandemic will last beyond 21 June.

The review taking place into international travel is important, but we must recognise that we may not have control over where people can go. Countries may keep their borders shut, as is happening in the USA at the moment and, of course, in the EU. Whether we need a covid vaccination certificate to go to these countries will very much be up to them.

The industry therefore needs support to carry on. At the moment, its biggest concern is that if it reopens when all the non-essential shops reopen, that is well and good, but it will not have anything to sell. Let me give the example of just three travel agents from my constituency. One has gone from a £4 million turnover to zero, one has gone from a £2.3 million turnover, with £310,000 gross profit, to a £7,000 loss, and the other has gone from between £1 million and £1.2 million turnover, with a 15% profit, down to a £4,000 loss. Yes, staff have been furloughed, but there are still the fixed costs. What is often also overlooked is that the actual business owners are not earning a single penny but still have their costs going forward. We should remember that this sector employs more people than the automotive sector, but businesses are struggling to get coronavirus business interruption loan scheme loans because they have no revenue coming in to meet the banks' criteria.

We really have to ensure that we support businesses in this sector and carry on with business grant support, business rate relief and the furlough scheme, because it could be three to four months after June before they are actually in a position to earn a living and sell products. Travel is a massive industry in this country, and it employs tens or hundreds of thousands of people, and we need to extend the support a little further. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General will take these comments back to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor as we prepare for the upcoming Budget.

Finally, I have mentioned the hospitality industry before, but I hope that we are not going to suddenly cut the legs off pubs that may have the ability to serve outside but that would not be financially viable doing so. We must ensure that the support packages in all these areas remain until businesses are financially viable and can stand on their own two feet.

7.37 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today's debate. I extend my thanks to healthcare staff and volunteers up and down our country for their invaluable help with the roll-out of the vaccine. I say that especially to everyone at Downham healthcare centre in my constituency, where I saw the roll-out in action, and it was managed superbly.

In this debate, I will raise concerns about the position of the NHS. The NHS is in crisis. Intensive care units are still overflowing with seriously ill patients who have coronavirus. Doctors are having to make crucial decisions, and many patients with other illnesses are not able to have their appointments.

[Janet Daby]

Prior to the pandemic, I spoke in the Chamber—physically, not virtually—about the nursing shortage. Before covid hit, the shortage of nurses was 100,000, and it was getting worse due to the lack of Government funding for student nurses and the uncertainty for nurses coming from the EU to live and work in the UK. We still have an enormous lack of nurses in hospitals, and there is also a lack of care staff to work in care homes.

Existing staff are overworked and underpaid, and the pandemic has exposed the decline in our health services after a decade of Tory cuts. Furthermore, areas of NHS hospital services are being privatised and given to private contractors, when the work can be done just as well by NHS staff when the money is reinvested into the NHS.

The National Audit Office has shown that the total accumulated debt of NHS providers was almost £11 billion in March 2019. While the Chancellor announced a 10-year plan for NHS support in January 2019, not all healthcare professionals have found this adequate. There are no plans to cover the cost of workforce training and expansion and, crucially, the cost of public health work.

It is purely the efforts of all those staff in the NHS—the doctors, nurses, porters, cleaners, cooks and administrators—that have kept and keep our NHS going, but they need more. We need a health service that is thriving and not struggling to survive. We need a long-term recovery plan that closes the financial holes, and we must prioritise mental health services, which are known as the poor relation of the NHS. Mental health services and CAMHS are needed more than ever as the country begins to recover from the effects of the pandemic, and I truly hope that the Health Secretary and his Ministers are listening to what needs to change and will act on it.

7.40 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Colleagues have been right to highlight the medical advances, which have been extraordinary, both on the vaccination front and in terms of treatment in hospitals. At the end of phase 1, we are told to anticipate that 99% of potential deaths will be averted. That is a great positive achievement that this country has made, and it may even bring the threat of covid down to the level of flu.

The very slow unwinding of lockdown will have ongoing costs, whether that is to education, health, employment or, indeed, civil liberties. Every day lost is a cost to people's health, wealth and liberty. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of pounds are being spent on digital immunity documentation, but the Government have dismissed concerns about freedom passes, whether those are national identity cards or perhaps digital footprints.

The Prime Minister has now announced in his statement the potential role of covid status certification in helping venues open safely. We have yet to find out the details of what that will mean, but does it mean that the Government's covid exit strategy of mass testing and vaccinations is ultimately dependent in a significant way on a national database? If so, will my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General set out the details of what this database will entail and how it will be used? How will it be monitored and how will what data is included on it, and its

breadth, be challenged? Will the test and trace data go from Health at one end to the police at the other? Can the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Transport and all these facets of Government be involved in some way or another in this database that is connected in one way or another with the covid status certification? Will that in turn link with, as has been highlighted, helping venues to open safely? Will that in turn therefore mean that the Government can prioritise access to certain activities and certain facilities, and therefore can the Government determine whether people can go to the pub, go to a concert, use public transport or go to work or education?

7.43 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) [V]: Coronavirus has had a profound impact on all our lives. The UK has had the worst death toll in Europe, and there have been more than 120,000 covid-19 related deaths. In Wirral, more than 850 people have lost their lives, leaving thousands of people grieving.

Today, the Prime Minister announced his plan for the easing of lockdown measures in England, and of course we all want life to return to normal as soon as it is safe, but the number of those with covid is still high, and so are infection rates. There is much the Government must learn from their failings. They were too slow to lock down at the start of the pandemic. They failed and continue to fail to make sure that people on low incomes get the financial support they need to isolate, and they also failed to quickly put in place an effective test and trace system.

In a debate last March, the Opposition spelled out the fact that almost 2 million workers on low incomes and 5 million self-employed workers did not qualify for statutory sick pay and that the level of payment was too low. We called on Ministers to address that as a matter of urgency. Now, as then, those who need to isolate must be able to do so without fear of how they will pay the bills. The Government ignored our call, and it took them until September to introduce the £500 Test and Trace support payment, yet the Resolution Foundation has said that seven in eight workers will not qualify for it. Ministers have had nearly a year to get this right. Why are they still getting it wrong?

The Government have failed, too, on test and trace. I wrote to the Minister on numerous occasions calling for local authority public health departments to be given the data they needed. The Government dragged their heels all the way and prioritised giving money to private companies to implement a centralised system. Ministers have been obsessed with outsourcing and spent almost £2 billion of public money on giving crony contracts to their Conservative friends and donors.

The dedication and commitment of NHS and care workers throughout the pandemic have been heroic, yet the Government have chosen this time of immense stress for all of them to publish a White Paper on proposals for major changes in the way health and social care are delivered in England. NHS England ran a consultation over Christmas and new year when health and care workers were either working round the clock or taking a few days' break. It is wholly unacceptable for the Secretary of State to go ahead with such huge changes while we are in the middle of the biggest public

health crisis our NHS has ever faced and while staff are exhausted. So I call on him to pause the whole process until all covid restrictions have been lifted and to carry out a full consultation with the public, setting out clearly what those proposals mean for patients and staff. To do anything less would be an insult to NHS workers, care staff and every single person who believes in and relies on our national health service.

7.46 pm

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): As we welcome the end of lockdown, dare we hope to see the banishment of its companion communication strategy, a strategy ruthlessly executed in pursuit of maximum compliance? It has been brutally effective, but so brutal that we now have children too frightened to go outdoors lest they kill their parents, adolescents isolated at home suffering from anxiety, eating disorders and self-harm, parents battling with depression, desperation and suicidal thoughts and many old people fading away from loneliness: as I say, a brutally, brutally effective strategy, but one that has created a deep well of anxiety. That anxiety will be visible at the school gate, in the classroom, in our workplace, in our homes, on our streets and in our police stations. Then it will end up in the NHS for months and years to come.

Many people will say that the victory justifies the cost: the cost in the jobs lost, the businesses ruined, the education forgone and the cost to the nation's long-term mental health and wellbeing. But I have to ask one question, which one day I will need answered. Before we unleashed this deliberate terror on our airwaves, did anyone in the room ask, "Is what we are doing ethical?" Did the Secretary of State ask, "Is this ethical?" Did the chief medical officer ask, "Is this ethical?" Did anyone—did a voice at SAGE—ask, "Is this ethical?" Did they ask, "Is it ethical to create a level of fear that will push many people to the very edge of what they can bear, or over that edge?" Did they ask, "Is it ethical for us to embark on a strategy that will leave many of our fellow citizens debilitated with fear, anxiety and worse for years to come, or perhaps a lifetime?"

Suffering in one's head matters. Knowingly creating that suffering strikes at the heart of the state's own morality and our morality. So I ask the Secretary of State, the chief medical officer and the members of SAGE to look directly at the damaged and the anguished—not over them, not through them, but directly at them—because it is time those people were seen, it is time their health mattered and it is time that they counted.

7.49 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): During previous debates of this nature, it has not always been possible to draw positives from what has been a difficult, dark year for all of us, but the roll-out of the vaccination programme is providing, in my constituents' words, a glimmer of light at the end of a long tunnel. On behalf of my constituents, I want to say a huge thank you to all the staff helping to deliver vaccinations at our GP practices and mass vaccination centres, as well as all the staff at the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board and the volunteers working behind the scenes to ensure that this enormous task is undertaken effectively. The Welsh Government also deserve credit for their effective management of the vaccine roll-out. Wales was the first nation to offer the

top four priority groups a covid jab, and one in four people in Wales have now received their first dose. Well done, Wales!

While it is right to celebrate the positives, it is also vital that we remember all those who continue to struggle during the lockdown. I want to talk about a few of the issues that have been highlighted in the debate. Young people have had their school and college lives upended by the crisis, and there is still huge uncertainty over the complicated picture around vocational and technical qualifications. It is more complicated in Wales, with some awarding bodies responsible to the Department for Education—that includes BTECs—and some to the Welsh Government. Students and their colleges need clarity on issues such as struggling to get work experience, being assessed and getting their grades awarded. The Welsh Government are doing all they can with colleges such as Coleg Gwent, but UK Education Ministers need to get our national awarding bodies to tell colleges as soon as possible what to do this year.

Mental health is an ongoing concern for people of all generations, and I hope that one positive to emerge from this period will be a renewed focus on the impact of isolation and loneliness in policy making at all levels. There are lots of good groups in my constituency doing good work. I particularly want to thank Newport County AFC, who I met last week, for the work it is doing through its support network for supporters struggling with mental health problems when fans have not been able to meet up at games. The club is a prime example of how sport can act as a force for good in the community, and I encourage other English Football League clubs to learn from its successful model.

I would also like to speak about the plight of asylum seekers in my constituency. Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration processing times are very long, there are lengthy waits for biometric residency permits, and despite a promise to prioritise those who work in the NHS, that does not seem to be happening. There is real hardship out there in that community. There are people with nothing.

I have spoken in previous debates about universal credit. The Chancellor's decision to scrap the £20 a week uplift from April, amounting to a cut of £1,000 a year, is indefensible, as is the fact that the uplift has never applied to the 2 million on legacy benefits. That needs to be sorted as soon as possible. We also need long overdue action for workers who have been excluded from UK Government support schemes during the pandemic. There is a Labour-led debate on this tomorrow and I hope that Conservative Members will listen and do the right thing.

7.52 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Government's decision to prioritise the reopening of schools on 8 March, and that should mean that every child is back in school. According to a study by Co-SPACE and the University of Oxford, there has been overwhelming harm to children from lockdown restrictions and school closures, particularly to their mental health. Child abuse reports to the NSPCC have risen by 79%, and anxiety and depression have increased substantially, as have self-harm, eating disorders and thoughts of suicide, according to the Royal College of Paediatrics, Ofsted and Reachwell. Even when the country was being bombed during world

[Joy Morrissey]

war two, schools remained open. We have no historical precedent for the damaging effect that school closures have had on our children's education and future.

Since parents have had to shoulder much of the responsibility for teaching during the pandemic, please will the Government commit to consulting representatives of parents' and children's groups, as well as teachers and unions, to develop detailed plans for our children to catch up on a lost year of education? Only parents know the full extent of the damage that this lockdown has inflicted on our children, and parents' voices and parental choice need to be prioritised. We need to be prepared to consider radical options, including summer learning camps and even giving parents the choice to allow their child to repeat the whole academic year.

I urge all MPs to meet parents' groups—including, for example, UsforThem—to hear about the damaging effects of lockdown and why it is essential for children to return to school. In that parent group, one parent in particular has shared her story with MPs, telling of the emotional and psychological effects the lockdown has had on all her children. She begged MPs to consider the long-term mental health consequences of the lockdown. One of her children developed Tourette's syndrome in the first lockdown, and this weekend that same child tried to take their own life. They did not want to live in a world under lockdown any more, and at the A&E, the attending physician said that they were seeing an increase in children presenting with mental health disorders during this lockdown. She asked me to share her story today because it is important that parents speak out on behalf of their children and the effects that this lockdown has had.

Depending on the level of trauma, particularly for primary schoolchildren during the pandemic, some children will lose their speech and language ability altogether. We saw this during the first lockdown. Children from every background will be manifesting signs of extreme stress and anxiety upon their return to school, such as obsessive compulsive disorder, eating disorders, anger, aggression and self-harm. I urge that schools in England be given additional funds, ring-fenced, for mental health support for children and for increased levels of teaching staff to help to provide mental and emotional support for children.

Finally, every school I have spoken to during the pandemic has begged the Government and media to stop their negative reporting of the pandemic—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I have allowed the hon. Lady to exceed her time in the hope that she was going to conclude, but I am afraid that I have to stop her there.

7.55 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey)—or “Beeconsfield”, if we were to pronounce it in the way of Benjamin Disraeli. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) for yet another very well-spoken contribution to the debate. He may not know it because he avoids such things, but he is a social media hit,

particularly with younger people, which proves to me that he is not an extremist, but is in fact a humanitarian who has spoken a great deal of sense throughout this pandemic, at times when sense has been in short supply, particularly in this House.

We have a superb vaccination programme but we cannot rest on our laurels. We must up the pace still further. Supply is the issue, not the capacity to get the jab into people's arms. I was somewhat perturbed by an off-the-record briefing from somebody in the Department of Health and Social Care this afternoon that “we cannot vaccinate our way out of this”. If that is the view of somebody in the Department, I would ask, “What on earth is the point of the vaccination programme?” but I hope that they have been sufficiently corrected by the Ministers in that Department.

The Prime Minister quite rightly, earlier on and through various media briefings over the weekend—or leaks, as they have come to be known—said that we will be driven in our progress out of lockdown by data and not dates, yet it is somewhat ironic to find that in this generally well-crafted document, dates are there in abundance and that we instead have four tests. The four tests amount to sitting an exam while knowing some of the marking criteria but certainly not knowing what the grade thresholds are in order to judge success at that exam.

For example, test one is:

“The vaccine deployment programme continues successfully.”

What does that mean? What date does that require people in different demographics to be vaccinated by, and so on? Test two is:

“Evidence shows vaccines are sufficiently effective in reducing hospitalisations and deaths in those vaccinated.”

What are the figures placed on hospitalisations and deaths to justify the further easing of lockdown measures? Test three is:

“Infection rates do not...surge in hospitalisations which would put unsustainable pressure on the NHS.”

What are those measurable pressures?

So yes, I agree entirely with the thrust of what was said by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, but in order to be able to judge whether we are moving at the right speed so that we can follow the data and not the dates, we need to know what it is being judged against.

7.58 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) [V]: As I begin, I give my thanks to everybody who has been part of the new vaccination centre at the City Hall in Hull. I went to visit it the other day and it is a tremendous success. I want to put on record my thanks to everybody for the part that they have played in making it such a huge, transformative event and place—I confess that I was quite emotional when I went to visit.

I add my voice to the call for the reprioritisation of people and adults with learning difficulties to be looked at in terms of the vaccine. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) what a difficult time they have been facing in the pandemic.

Unfortunately today, we had bad news in Hull: the proportion of young unemployed people is now around 25%. This deeply concerns me because, when the Government talk about building back, I do not want to

build back; I do not want to build back to the inequality and the system that we had previously. I want to build forward to something better.

I would like for a moment to talk about something positive that has come out of coronavirus: the revolutionary change in the way that we work. So many people in their jobs up and down the country have shown that it is productive and possible to work from home. Of course this is not for everybody, and not everybody would want to do this by choice, but I do think it provides an opportunity for areas like Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle to make accessible jobs that, because of geography, were not previously available for people living in our area. I hope the Government seize on this, because, as the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), said in his speech the other day, people should not have to leave home to find a good job, and the changes to the way we work just might be a bit of hope that comes out of this pandemic.

One of the disappointments in the Government's strategy around education is the lack of focus on place. It seems to talk just about a national strategy, and I hope, again, that they will talk to the universities, particularly the civic universities, about the role they can play in job creation.

We have in Hull almost a good luck charm in the guise of the shadow Business Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). Back in 2008, when he was involved in some work in Hull, we signed a memorandum of understanding with Siemens that led to Siemens creating the wind turbine factory in Hull, which has just now doubled in size, giving our city great news. I am hoping that he can be our same token of good luck when he comes to talk to the Zero Carbon Humber project about the work we want to do in job generation.

I just want the Government to clearly understand that we are never asking for handouts. We are merely asking for fairness: help us to help ourselves, and support these avenues of job creation for the city and area we love so much.

8.1 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I very much welcome today's road map and the Prime Minister's presentation and tone. Several things become self-evident. Immortality is not a policy option; that was well put today. Zero-covid is not only unachievable, but in many ways also undesirable given the history of epidemiology and the way in which viruses mutate to become ever less harmful provided they are in moderate and safe circulation.

I also welcome the timetable. Although we were not supposed to have dates, we do have some dates: they are longstop dates, they are backstop dates, they are not-before dates, but we do have some dates, which is helpful guidance for business and the rest of us. I welcome, too, the fact that the statement made it clear that restrictions will be lifted based on the data—provided it is not before the not-before dates. I also welcome the fact that any restrictions that are lifted are now seen to be irreversible. That gives a degree of certainty, albeit later than I would have hoped for, to business and society and those who care about civil liberties.

Finally, I want to say a huge thank you to the Prime Minister and to all involved for agreeing to open our schools again. That will make a huge difference to mothers,

particularly single mothers, who are under pressure at home with their children, but also to the children themselves and their future mental health and education.

As for the vaccines, what a wonderful story: we are first in the world not only with vaccines, but also with genomics studies and the medicines around vaccines. We have become the world's go-to place for vaccinations and everything surrounding them. That is incredibly positive.

I still have concerns about the hospitality sector, as the dates seem rather a long way away given the clear data already delivered in terms of hospitalisations, which are literally plummeting because the vaccines and the vaccine programme are working. I am also concerned about our care homes: yes, one visitor for somebody who is elderly and worried about things and worried about their family is really good, but we should certainly go further.

I have two questions. First, as we can believe in the vaccines—the data is clear, as is the evidence from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the real-world data—and if the vaccines are working and deaths and hospitalisations are plummeting, we must be able to accelerate this programme, not simply set it in stone based on dates which appear to some degree to be arbitrary. Secondly, why on earth are we even talking about the R rate anymore? What has the R rate got to do with anything if all the vulnerable groups are protected and serious ill health and death are being avoided?

So I welcome the statement but think we can do more.

8.4 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) [V]: I have just been prompted by my husband to tell the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) that it is not just mums, but dads who are delighted to have schools reopening—my husband has been home-schooling our daughter for many weeks.

Our children and young people have too often been forgotten about during this pandemic. They have been cast aside and, until today, put low on the priority list, so I very much welcome the Prime Minister's commitment today to reopen schools on 8 March to those who are not currently allowed to attend. Clearly, children's education is critically important, but so is their mental health and wellbeing. We cannot underestimate the toll the pandemic has taken on our children and young people. They have had face-to-face learning curtailed, time playing and socialising with friends banned, sporting and other recreational activities banned, and exams on and then off, all the while with ongoing uncertainty about what assessment will entail.

The Prince's Trust says that more than half of young people are anxious. We know that one in six children aged five to 15 now suffers from a probable mental health condition. One in four has self-harmed over the past year and the pressure on child and adolescent mental health services beds is being described by health officials as being at crisis point. So while the Government's £1 billion catch-up fund to help tackle the impact of lost teaching time is very welcome, any academic catch-up will be undermined by poor mental health.

Although schools have flexibility in spending the catch-up premium, Government guidance heavily emphasises academic catch-up. Early evidence suggests that while some schools are using a small proportion of the funding

[Munira Wilson]

on additional wellbeing and mental health support, it is overwhelmingly being used to support academic catch-up. That is why I am calling on the Government today to invest in a ring-fenced resilience fund, as recommended by YoungMinds. This £20 per pupil fund will ensure the value of the academic catch-up fund is fully realised and prevent vulnerable young people from being left behind. The additional funds would allow schools to develop bespoke mental health packages for their pupils, such as counselling, digital support, staff wellbeing, peer support programmes and access to extracurricular activities in a covid-safe way. No two schools are the same. Each face their own challenges and know their children best, so the resilience fund must be flexible to allow schools to provide support that meets their own needs.

Last week, the Children's Commissioner said in her final speech:

"I want to see the Prime Minister getting passionate about making sure that we don't define children by what's happened during this year, but we define ourselves by what we offer to them." I say to the Minister today, if the Government are really serious about putting children first, they should offer our children and young people a holistic package of support that is not just focused on their academic needs, but puts their wellbeing at its heart.

8.7 pm

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con) [V]: A Scotch egg, Madam Deputy Speaker: is it or is it not a main meal? That is the question. It is certainly a question I never thought I would have to answer in my role as a Member of Parliament. Although I commend colleagues who ventured there and the even braver ones who moved into the fraught world of pasty politics—should it or should it not have a side salad?—I am glad we will be leaving people to make their own judgment in future.

Those may seem like trivial points, but they highlight the fundamental point that has been the hardest thing for many people to bear over the last year, which is the loss of our freedom: freedom to come and go as we please, to see our loved ones, to go to work, to run our business, to go on holiday to get married or to drink in the pub—the list goes on. Freedom is something that I think many of us have taken for granted—I know I certainly have—because we have never known life without it. I will never take it for granted again.

I strongly welcome the road map announced by the Prime Minister this afternoon and the path it sets out to restore our freedoms. I welcome the priority given to the reopening of schools. They are the best place for children to be. I also welcome the new test of two households as an alternative to the rule of six, so that a family of five can soon see their grandparents again without ending up on the wrong side of the law. I hope that the review into social distancing will enable us to end it sooner rather than later as the vaccine takes effect.

It is the UK's vaccine roll-out, powering on at a tremendous speed, that makes the road map possible. I want to thank everyone involved, in particular the team at Gamston community vaccination centre in Rushcliffe, whom I had the privilege to meet over recess. They described to me the scenes of relief, joy and happy tears they had seen as the first cohorts of the over-80s came through the door for their vaccine. "You have given me

back the last years of my life," they were told, "I will be able to see my family again." They are not only administering vaccines; they are injecting hope back into people's lives.

Work is also going on here, led by Nottingham University, to develop a new type of vaccine which, if successful, will overcome any issues with the future mutation of the virus protein spike; it starts clinical trials in the next few weeks. This is a day to be optimistic, but we are well aware of the challenges that still face us. I want to thank everyone who is working to overcome them, enabling us to take the path back to freedom.

8.10 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): With all the delays that are built into the various stages of the statement, I think it is very unfortunate that the Prime Minister has not learned from the magnificent work undertaken by Kate Bingham and the vaccine taskforce about how to move safely and at pace.

The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) rightly drew our attention to the plight of the aviation industry and, quite frankly, got a fairly limp response. Our economy needs that traffic moving again, and a key enabler would be a vaccine certificate—a vaccine passport, if you like. The Government response in the paper shows no sense of urgency. We will not even get an answer until some time in June. It is not just for aviation; a vaccine passport could assist with the safe reopening of hospitality, sporting and leisure venues. Many of these are on the brink, and they need every help in getting back on their feet, while their workers want their jobs back. It also matters for their customers. The Government's own survey in the document shows that half of adults are reporting boredom, loneliness, anxiety or stress. Unemployment kills; loneliness kills as well.

Why not have a vaccine passport? Huge advances in technology over the past decades mean that it should be a relatively straightforward process. The NHS keeps records of everyone who has had the jab—I have my own card here—and this information could be stored on a plastic card produced in a secure environment or possibly on a mobile phone app, and carried around in a pocket ready to be presented on entry at any commercial venue. Let us be clear that the NHS already issues yellow fever cards as the proof of vaccination that some countries require before people can visit.

Anthony Mangnall: Does the right hon. Member not realise the damage having a vaccination certificate would do for anyone under the age of 35, who will not be at the frontline of getting a vaccination and will have to remain behind locked doors, with their freedoms curbed, for not having the vaccine? It is a terrible idea.

John Spellar: I fail to follow the logic of the hon. Gentleman that says he would rather the places stayed closed. I think it would be a rather good idea if venues were actually open, and people could then visit. Perhaps we ought also to be speeding up the vaccine. We are already down to the over-50s, and moving it further down should be part of the Government's ambition.

I have to say that the omens are not encouraging. Last year, we saw that while many venues had spent considerable sums on making their premises covid safe, that was just ignored and disregarded, and they were closed down just the same in the face of precious little

evidence that they had played any significant role in spreading the disease. Sometimes one does wonder whether this is driven by the Victorian hangover in the British Government psyche that distrusts the public actually enjoying themselves, but at stake are businesses and jobs, and our economy and society, because leave this too long and, as I was just saying, there will be no venues to go back to. That would be a human and economic disaster, and it would also change our country.

One of the attractions of visiting, living and working here is our rich cultural life. Music and theatre, pubs and clubs, sporting events, hotels and restaurants make life worth living here, but they also make us stand out in the world. The Government are putting this outstanding ecosystem at risk, so I urge the Prime Minister, and the Paymaster General here, to shift back from risk avoidance to risk management, to ramp up vaccination to the maximum, to bring forward the great reopening—and, incidentally, then to help the rest of the world with vaccines—and to get Britain back to work and play.

8.14 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con) [V]: I am conscious of the local situation in my city. I woke up today to hear that infection rates in Peterborough were the fourth highest in the country. On social media, I was told that Peterborough is “letting down Cambridgeshire”, that we are a joke and that I should be ashamed to represent the people who are breaking the rules. BBC Radio Cambridgeshire told me in a live interview that the Millfield and Bourges Boulevard area was the most intense covid hotspot in the country. That is just down the road from my house, where I live. It was later revealed that this spike was due to a covid outbreak at Peterborough prison. This is obviously regrettable, but it is not a reflection of local behaviour.

For much of the pandemic, figures in Peterborough were below the national average. The rate is indeed falling in Peterborough, albeit more slowly than in other areas. Peterborough is a working city. Many people do not have the ability to work from home; they work in factories and customer-facing jobs. If they do not work, they do not pay their bills or put food on the table. For many, lockdown is misery. People without well-paid jobs that can be done from behind a computer screen, without big homes, without nice gardens and without happy homes are desperate.

I welcome the Prime Minister’s plan, but I do not apologise for saying that opening up fully cannot come soon enough. I hear stories of young people wallowing in dismay, worried about their mental health; of businesses struggling with no income; of self-employed people like driving instructors with mounting debts; of one of my school friends in the entertainment business being forced to take a short-term factory job; and of families giving—often all they have—to local charities in order to feel part of something.

We have this cautious approach to opening up, but there is nothing cautious about keeping the lockdown restrictions in place for one second longer than necessary. It causes poverty, hopelessness and despair. So back to my social media trolls, who often have FBPE in their Twitter handle: I am proud of Peterborough—please show empathy and understanding, and be less judgmental. Let us open up as soon as we possibly can by responding to the data and doing the right thing.

8.17 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP) [V]: I begin by paying tribute to my NHS colleagues, every key worker, and every volunteer and vaccinator in my Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituency for their continued and tireless efforts.

Over the weekend, the Secretary of State dismissed the High Court ruling that he had acted unlawfully in his failure to comply with transparency rules by advancing the argument that the ends justify the means. Of course, everyone knows that this is yet more bulldog bluster, attempting to drape a cloak of acceptability over the cronyism at the heart of this Government’s procurement. As everyone across these islands knows, you can’t polish a cowpat.

Earlier today, the Prime Minister made it clear not only that he is willing to defend his Secretary of State’s unlawful conduct, but that he does so by pursuing the same flawed Machiavellian argument—that the ends justify the means. That should concern every Member of this place, because establishing that there has been

“No misuse of taxpayer money and no actual or perceived conflicts of interest”,

is a ministerial commitment authored by the Prime Minister himself, along with the

“precious principles of public life enshrined”

in his own ministerial code—

“integrity, objectivity, accountability, transparency, honesty and leadership in the public interest”—

which

“must be honoured at all times; as must the political impartiality of our much admired civil service.”

If this Government continue their refusal to disclose the names of companies linked to Ministers, hon. Members, peers and officials that were awarded preferential contracts via a high priority lane, and thereby conceal any material, financial or fiduciary relationship between those entities, that will amount to the most profound breach of the ministerial code possible. We can all make honest mistakes, but the wilful concealment of information that serves to confirm honourable behaviour or otherwise is clearly and irrefutably not in the public interest. The publication as such should be of little consequence if there is indeed nothing to hide.

Standing by or surrendering our principles can be costly, but that choice only matters if they are of intrinsic meaning and value to the holder. Even the appearance of manipulating the means to serve other ends is morally and ethically hazardous, and an unwillingness to act with integrity and transparency risks a slip from democracy into authoritarianism. This Government have demanded that we back their plans under a pretence of collaboration, but when they dictate every step and close their ears to other voices, then they seek obedience and acquiescence. The Government must not block or otherwise interfere with the lawful scrutiny of Ministers by Parliament. By backing the unlawful conduct of the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister has made it clear how distant his relationship is with his own ministerial code.

8.20 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: We have had some fantastic news today—some really good news. We have had the Scottish study, which shows that

[Mrs Pauline Latham]

the vaccine is preventing serious illness and that people are not being admitted to hospital in the numbers that they were. We have also heard that the uptake of the vaccine is far higher and that the vaccine is far more effective than anybody had anticipated.

We were told by the Prime Minister that we would be driven by the data, not by the dates, but, sadly, we have the dates, and the dates go on for another four months. Businesses cannot cope with it. Let me give a few examples. A friend of mine can walk around a golf course with his wife, but he cannot play golf with her. There is no sense in that. It is outdoors and it is safe. Golf courses and other outside non-contact sports should be opened up earlier. Hospitality firms spent tens of thousands of pounds on things to make themselves covid secure, but they are not allowed to use them. In the worst weather, we will be able to meet outside, rather than inside in a covid-secure way. That needs to be looked at again, because these businesses are suffering and we will lose many of them.

I want to talk primarily about weddings, which are a big thing in my constituency, as I have a number of wedding venues. Nobody can buy their dresses yet. The mother of the bride cannot get her outfit, her shoes or her hat. Why not? Because weddings are not going ahead. Many couples have already given up their weddings perhaps two or even three times in this past year. They are desperate to get married. They want to have a celebration with their family and friends. The wedding venues have had no money for a year, and we are now talking about another four months before a proper wedding can take place. These businesses are desperate to open up, as are the people who sell the wedding dresses, as are the flower providers, as are the caterers, and as are the suppliers of the wine and the beer. We need them to open up. We need them to be allowed to work again, because if we do not let them open soon, we will lose those industries as well as all the hospitality industries that are so desperate to get going. They are all losing money at the moment. Nothing is covering their costs. They need to be able to get back to work, and all the people whom they have furloughed need their jobs back. I hope that the Prime Minister will look again at where he is going.

8.24 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to all those in the NHS across our local communities, including in my constituency, for everything that they have done to support people during the pandemic. My thoughts are with all those who have lost loved ones. As many will be aware, black and minority ethnic groups and those from socially disadvantaged communities have been hit the hardest by this pandemic, with Pakistanis and Bangladeshis facing the largest number of deaths in the second wave. I know how hard this is, as, in the past week, I have lost a very close relative. Early in January, we lost another beloved member of our family. This is the experience of many in our communities up and down the country, which is why it is absolutely vital that as we move towards easing the lockdown and open up schools, we make sure that families are protected. We must ensure that those who still have not been vaccinated, particularly in intergenerational families living in overcrowded conditions

in high-density parts of the country like my constituency, are properly supported as we move towards opening up our society.

In Tower Hamlets, we have seen a very intensive effort by local providers—by the council in partnership with the Royal London Hospital, Queen Mary University of London, our GPs, the clinical commissioning group and others, including the London Muslim Centre and inter-faith communities—who have come together to tackle some of the reticence around people getting their vaccinations, to deal with misinformation and misunderstanding, and to make sure that people get vaccinated.

We are facing a race against time, so I will focus my remarks on what we desperately need the Government to do to support local communities such as those in my constituency. We need the Government to make sure that GP surgeries have more of the AstraZeneca vaccines so that they can contact local residents, who trust them, and get to people who need to be vaccinated and still have not been. We have seen an improvement in the numbers, but the differentials are still huge between black residents and south Asian residents compared with their white counterparts. We need to redouble our efforts, so I call on Ministers to provide extra support to local GP surgeries to make the vaccines available so that as we open up our schools and our economy, people who are still at risk can get the vaccination and be protected.

8.26 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement earlier, and in particular I welcome his honesty in recognising that we cannot pursue a zero-covid strategy. We have to face up to the fact that this virus will be with us forever and find ways to live with it. Thankfully, the vaccine provides us with exactly that.

Some of us wrote to the Prime Minister to ask him to take advantage of the vaccine to relax restrictions as quickly as possible; I chide the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), for describing those of us who did so as pressuring the Prime Minister to "throw caution to the wind."

We were expressing genuine concern about the wider impact of Government policy on restrictions on the welfare of our nation, and particularly on lives and livelihoods. The truth of the matter is that the burden of fighting this disease through social restrictions is not being felt fairly. Frankly, a middle-class white-collar professional can work from home. It is a bit inconvenient and they cannot go out for dinner, but it is just tiresome; it does not have an adverse effect on their health.

We should also reflect on those workers who have carried on going to work, for little thanks, yet they have been in harm's way. I am referring to our postal workers and refuse collectors—all those people involved in delivering the services that every one of our constituents needs and expects. I do not see any of them demanding to be further up the queue to get a vaccine. We all owe them a great deal of thanks.

My biggest concerns are for those people who will lose their jobs. For each and every day that this lockdown continues, more jobs will be lost. That is my concern. There was a time when the Labour party was bothered about workers and jobs, but that is now left to us, and

we will continue to fight that fight. My fundamental concern is that with each day that passes, we really must make sure that we lift the restrictions as soon as possible.

The truth of the matter is that no Government should restrict the rights and liberties of their subjects without being able to demonstrate the outcome, and I am afraid that demonstrations of the effectiveness of these lockdowns have been rather poor. There is no evidence that the curfew saved any lives. We know that 2% of transmission has taken place in what are now covid-secure venues. We know that we entered into the November lockdown but came out with higher rates because schools remained open and they were the agents of transmission into people's households and businesses. The truth is that lockdowns do not work, but we have the key to deal with this virus through the vaccinations. The Government need to be much more ambitious than the route map that has been laid before us today, so that we can take full advantage to secure our freedom again.

8.29 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I begin as I have previously by praising the work of Cardiff and Vale University Health Board and the Welsh Government on their vaccine delivery, with truly remarkable work done by an incredible team. As some of my Welsh colleagues have said, we are the first in the UK to offer the vaccine to everyone in the top four groups, ahead of target and ahead of schedule.

As chair of the all-party party group on HIV and AIDS, and in the spirit of cross-party and cross-UK working, I thank Ministers—my Welsh Government colleague Vaughan Gething, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Vaccines Minister—for the steps they have taken on access to vaccines for those living with HIV. They have made an important set of decisions to ensure that people living with HIV can get their vaccines in the best way for them, and I hope we will see that across the United Kingdom.

The key question my local health board is asking at the moment is the same as the one we have heard echoed across the House today. Can the UK scale up supply even faster? The health board can deliver and get the vaccine to more people, more quickly, but we need supplies. I hope the Minister will respond to that in closing.

In the meantime, we need the economic support to continue. I am sorry that the Government have managed to find plenty for crony contracts, as we have heard in the last few days, but the Chancellor has failed to deliver for many of the 3 million who are excluded, including many of my constituents. Where restrictions continue for longer—we have heard about the plans in England today, but we heard about the plans for easing lockdown in Wales from the First Minister on Friday—we must support businesses to help to secure jobs as we rebuild. That has to include an extension of the furlough scheme, action on business debt and an extension, for example, of the VAT cut for hospitality, retail and leisure for at least six months. I hope the Chancellor will outline such a measure in the Budget next week.

Mental health in children has been raised many times. An important report by the Children's Commissioner for Wales released last week is about the impacts on children. I welcome the response of the Welsh Government Minister, Eluned Morgan. The commissioner's office says

that four in 10 of the 17-year-olds who took part in the survey said they felt lonely most of the time, and a third of 17 to 18-year-olds said they felt worried most of the time. We all have to take those issues on board and ensure that support for young people's mental health is there going forward.

Finally, I want to talk about the global health battle. The Prime Minister commented on the G7 summit, but we have to work with countries around the world to support public health systems, not just with vaccines or diagnostic capacity, crucial though they are, but with nurses, doctors and healthcare systems built to deliver the vaccines and the healthcare response. We saw some terrible things happen during the HIV pandemic around the world, with millions losing their lives. We cannot make the same mistakes with covid or indeed the other global health challenges we face. I hope the Prime Minister will involve leaders from Africa, the African Union and global health bodies at the G7 summit in Cornwall, even if it is virtually.

8.32 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I welcome the road map announced today, particularly the return to school on 8 March, the clear vision, the refutation of a zero-covid strategy, and the commitment to a steady and irreversible lifting of restrictions. This will bring added certainty and hope to many of my constituents.

Our local roll-out of vaccinations in Runnymede and Weybridge has been fantastic. Vaccination hubs have opened at Chertsey Hall, Egham Hythe and St Peter's Hospital. Each and every one of our volunteers and staff at these sites are saving lives and getting us all one step closer to the lifting of restrictions. I thank everyone who has worked and continues to work so hard in our vaccination hubs and everyone who helped out or volunteered in the recent surge testing in Egham.

The road map charts a course to lifting the restrictions on the back of the vaccination programme, and it promises that the process will be irreversible, but I hope that the Minister will not think me churlish in asking for another plan—a long-term plan to enable us to live with the virus and support the NHS as it faces the major challenges on the horizon, in particular the coming winter pressures.

It is increasingly clear that covid is a seasonal disease, like other coronaviruses. Winter pressures have plagued the NHS for pretty much every year that I have worked as a doctor, but this autumn and winter will be different. The NHS has reduced hospital capacity as a consequence of social distancing in hospitals, the increased need for infection control measures such as testing and the burden of cleaning and PPE on throughput. Even if the number of patients needing to be hospitalised with covid this winter is radically reduced—and we all hope it will be—the NHS will still face normal winter pressures from diseases such as flu and pneumonia, but with reduced capacity as a result of its covid infection control measures.

I asked my local hospital, St Peter's, what it needs to increase NHS surge capacity—is it more money, real estate or oxygen? It says that the limiting factor is not enough trained staff, which I am sure is the case in many of our hospitals. The NHS and our staffing plans were not designed for surge capacity in a pandemic or

[Dr Ben Spencer]

when recovering from one; why would they be? While the road map focuses on what we need to do to reduce the number of patients who need to be hospitalised, we also need to think of the other side of the equation: how to increase overall NHS hospital capacity—not just surge capacity for covid, but capacity for all care in a post-covid world. While I welcome the announcement of increased nursing applications over the weekend, we need these nurses now. We know that winter pressures are coming later this year. What do we need to do now to prepare us, so that we can live with this virus for the long term, as the road map charts, and prevent any prospect of future restrictions?

8.36 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It has now been 338 days since Australia closed its borders; 909 Australians have lost their lives since then. It is 335 days since New Zealand closed its borders—a policy which has meant that only 26 people have lost their lives. It is 340 days since Taiwan closed its borders; it has managed to prevent the virus from killing more than nine of its citizens. But it was only 380 days after the virus had arrived at our shores that the UK Government brought in just a partial hotel quarantine, and it has come too late to save the almost 121,000 people who have died—people's loved ones: people's fathers, mothers, grandparents, brothers and sisters. Given that we have one of the highest death rates in the world and one of the worst economic downturns out of all the G7 countries, does the Minister truly believe that the Government have handled the crisis well?

Earlier today I spoke with Ryan, who manages the Queens Head pub in Frodsham in my constituency of Weaver Vale. Ryan, like many people up and down the country, wants to be optimistic about the road map out of this lockdown. He has nothing but praise for our local NHS, GPs and volunteers, who are doing a remarkable job with the vaccine roll-out for groups 1 to 4 in my constituency. He is, however, concerned that today's announcement lacks the economic reassurance that his business and others like it need. Will the furlough scheme be extended, as well as the business rates holiday and reductions in VAT?

Those constituents who are in low-paid work, many of them key workers—the very people we clapped every Thursday some time ago—cannot afford to self-isolate. The Government need to step in, step up and reform the £500 isolation payment, and how about sickness pay too? The 3 million people who have been excluded from any support since the start of this pandemic must finally be given a lifeline. The only VIP lane of fast-track support that every Government Minister should be focusing on is our citizens—their lives and their livelihoods. It is vital that the Government get the next few months right, to ensure that this lockdown remains our last.

8.39 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con) [V]: I was delighted with today's announcement by the Prime Minister. It gives us something to look forward to, if all goes well, on 21 June—and in my case, for selfish reasons because two of my daughters can have the sort of weddings that they would have wished for. However—there is always a “however”—I still have constituents

who are self-employed, business owners or limited company directors and who have not received financial support for close to a year now. I have signed a cross-party letter to the Chancellor urging him to support the 3 million who have been excluded. I hope he takes note of this letter and delivers in the Budget next week.

I despair that I recently received a response from the Department of Health and Social Care to an inquiry I had submitted in May last year, and one from the Department for Education to a point that I raised in September last year. These Departments really must do better in answering letters. Many of my constituents have highlighted the difficulties they are experiencing with Southend-on-Sea Borough Council distributing the Government's business support packages. I hope the Government will provide the necessary information, guidance and support to local councils to ensure that business grants are distributed quickly and fairly, because at the moment I do not know who is at fault.

I recently held surgeries for the wonderful local churches and charities in my constituency. The most common theme that was brought up with me was the loss of regular income streams. I urge the Government to look into what financial support can be given to these groups.

I was also very pleased to visit Highlands Surgery and Saxon Hall vaccination centres to see how the roll-out of the vaccine is happening in Southend. I was very impressed with how the centres were being run and the professionalism and dedication shown by Dr Alex Shaw and all the volunteers and staff. I was delighted to learn that the programme was going so well. I thank Mr Anthony McKeever and Tricia D'Orsi for organising those visits. I am, however, still receiving calls and emails from constituents confused about where and when they will receive their vaccinations. Many of them do not realise that they do not have to accept a vaccination at a centre miles away but can actually wait for a local appointment, so there really does need to be clearer communication on this very important issue.

In the fullness of time, of course, there will be an inquiry into what has gone on since the pandemic started, but I ask the Department of Health and Social Care to look very closely into how coronavirus deaths have been recorded. I have too many constituents saying that they believe their relatives died with coronavirus but did not die as a result of it, and frankly the deaths from influenza are puzzling.

I am very pleased with the Prime Minister's announcement about care home residents being able to receive a named visitor, and I applaud everyone involved in this magnificent vaccine programme, which leads the world.

8.42 pm

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP) [V]: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I am particularly pleased to do so given just how significant a day it has been. In Scotland, our youngest citizens have been able to return to their nurseries, and in primary schools the vaccine roll-out continues apace thanks to our fantastic NHS. We have also had the brilliant news that both the AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines appear to be doing exactly what we all hoped they would, just as other nations like Israel have already found. This news is without doubt the clearest sign we have had in these past 12 difficult months that better times are finally ahead.

But of course with that hope of what is to come comes a huge responsibility: a responsibility on an individual basis to stick to the rules and strive to protect others as the vaccine roll-out continues, but also a responsibility on this UK Government to keep us safe and to ensure that the financial support that is needed is made available. I cannot be the only one who is entirely bemused, even angry, at the news today that this UK Government are seeking to reintroduce international holidays from 17 May. Not only have they chosen to keep the door ajar and put us all at risk of further international variants by refusing to introduce managed quarantine for all arrivals, but they are now intent on opening that door right back up, at the exact same time as we all read about the Brazilian variant of covid having been found in Ireland. Now, more than ever, we need this UK Government to put public health first, to listen to the scientists and to look at the successes of other nations around the world, particularly those in the far east, but instead they appear to be doubling down and repeating the mistakes of the past—and what a frustrating sight that truly is.

Repeating the mistakes of the past is something that this UK Government have gained a particular speciality in. I have sat and listened to announcement after announcement from the Chancellor over the past 12 months, but I have yet to see him address the plight of the 3 million people in the UK who have received no financial support at all during this pandemic: the newly self-employed, company directors and freelancers, all of whom have been shunned by the Tories. As the Chancellor prepares for the Budget, that wrong needs to be righted.

The Government cannot just stop there. We need to see the furlough scheme extended; the chaos of October simply cannot be repeated. We need to see a pragmatic approach to bounce back and business interruption loans that results in these debt burdens being turned into grants, and we need to see the appalling practice of fire and rehire banished to the Victorian ages, where it belongs.

Perhaps most important of all, we need to see the Government put their money where their mouth is and use this opportunity to invest in a renewable, sustainable future. We have seen the 10-point plan. We have seen the energy White Paper. We now need to see action, not just words. The north-east of Scotland has endured an incredibly tough period as a result of covid and the oil price crash, but we have the opportunity to lead on that renewable future. However, that can happen only with the Government's support, and I urge them to deliver for Aberdeen and the north-east of Scotland.

8.45 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con) [V]: I would like to highlight the impact of covid-19 on the mental health of farmers and their families. A recent study by the Farm Safety Foundation found that 88% of young farmers now rate mental health as the biggest problem faced by farmers today, up from 82% in 2018—this is a hidden problem. Cheshire agricultural chaplaincy has also seen a worrying marked rise in levels of poor mental health.

Financial concerns, exacerbated by the pandemic, and the stress induced by them have had a significant impact on the mental health of farmers. Food market destabilisation affecting goods such as potatoes, high-end meat and milk due to the collapse of the hospitality sector last year continues to have knock-on effects.

There are instances of farming businesses feeling pressurised by banks that are questioning their serviceability and removing overdraft facilities. This has placed severe stress on farmers.

With regard to social separation, lockdowns have exacerbated an already lonesome industry. Those who live and farm alone have been isolated from family and friends, as well as from the wider agricultural community, whose members normally meet regularly and encourage one another throughout the year, including at county shows or market sales.

For many, farming is an isolated existence, but in other farming families there can be up to three generations living on the same site. As with many walks of life, marital pressures have increased exponentially as a result of lockdowns, with the added pressures for many of home schooling. In some farming families, children have been kept at home for almost a year, as there is a real fear of them bringing covid-19 home and spreading it throughout the family. That is especially stressful for farmers, because the nature of their work means that if they or their other staff contract covid, taking sick leave is not an option.

The pandemic has also highlighted existing labour shortages for farmers, particularly in the light of ongoing concerns about the European labour market, aside from Brexit. Some workers come to farms for two or three months in a normal period, providing significant help for farmers, but due to the cost of obtaining a test to travel, the need for quarantining and the uncertainty about being able to return home if lockdown restrictions change, many workers have become wary of travelling to the UK, causing uncertainty for farmers.

These stresses facing the industry will extend long after the virus has gone, so the importance of providing support for farmers and those in the wider agricultural sector, and for those who support them, such as chaplaincies and the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, has never been greater.

8.48 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). Having listened to hon. Members, it is clear that issues in my constituency are replicated throughout the wonderful United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I want to highlight the hospitality sector in particular. I have a number of hotels in my constituency, along with many B&Bs, as would be expected in such an exquisitely beautiful constituency. They are all looking with anticipation to the success of the vaccine roll-out and to their businesses opening again. There is a clear understanding that it will take time for things to go back to where they once were; tables will be further apart, meaning fewer customers. The industry looks forward to reopening with anxiety; businesses have already spent a fortune making their premises covid secure.

I was contacted by Hospitality Ulster, which has seen a sales drop of 53.8%, equating to a loss in revenue of £72 billion. The hospitality downturn is estimated to be over 10 times worse than the impact of the financial crisis, and across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland some 1 million jobs have been lost.

The UK's world-leading tourism industry is the sixth largest in the world, but 40% of accommodation and food service activities businesses have no or low confidence

[*Jim Shannon*]

that their businesses can survive for the next three months. I will therefore be seeking help for them for the next three to six months, as this is a critical time for the future of the hospitality sector.

I wish to make a comment on behalf of the beauty and close-contact industries. They need to get back into the black, and this needs to come with continued rates reduction and help with keeping staff on. They will not be able to see the regular pre-covid number of clients in one day, and the first staff to be let go are the lower-paid staff who are trained only for this job. We need to retain these staff, looking to the time when the vaccines are standard and life hits a semblance of normality and safety hand in hand—the time when covid-19 will be treated similarly to the flu. I believe this time will be upon us soon, but this industry needs help to make it through.

May I also make a point about visiting elderly parents and partners in hospital and homes? There are still families who are unable to spend those last precious weeks with their loved ones and I believe that the Department of Health should address this matter urgently. I concur with what others have said about the mental health of our children, which has been a massive issue for me in my constituency, be it in respect of pre-school, P1 or P6.

The stakes are high, and if ever there was a time to get it right, it must be now. We have asked much of our constituents for the sake of safety, and now we must give much for the sake of their future. We must invest in people and our businesses, and come through this better together, as always.

8.51 pm

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Prime Minister's statement today outlining a road map to reducing lockdown restrictions, about which many of us spoke during the previous general debate on the pandemic last month. I also wish to reiterate my support for the position expressed by some colleagues today that the lifting of measures should be based on the latest data, rather than on fixed and arbitrary dates. However, giving businesses, families and children some degree of certainty during these most uncertain times is wholly welcome and I ask Opposition Members to join me in urging the Welsh Government to provide further clarity and transparency for our route in Wales out of lockdown.

The UK was the first country in the world to authorise a vaccine against covid-19 and its roll-out is the biggest such programme in NHS history. Despite that, we have been successful in achieving the target of offering everyone in the top four priority groups, as identified by the JCVI, a first vaccine dose by 15 February. That was a hugely ambitious task and I thank all those involved in making it a great British success story. Now the UK Government have set a further target of offering all adults a vaccine by the end of July. Again, that is an ambitious target, one that I am sure we will also achieve, largely due to the tremendous efforts of our fantastic frontline staff and our UK military personnel.

However, we need to see the same level of ambition from the Welsh Government here in Wales, and they need to work with the UK Government. I, for one, am glad that we did not sign up to the EU's vaccine procurement

programme and this shows what can be done when all four nations of the UK work together to combat a common enemy—one United Kingdom standing up for our interests at home and abroad. The UK Government have provided an unprecedented amount of support to the people of Wales during this pandemic—£5.8 billion to the Welsh Government, and that is on top of schemes such as the furlough scheme, the self-employment income support scheme and eat out to help out. Only last month, an additional £650 million of such support was announced.

The successful vaccine roll-out and the huge support that the Government have given the people and businesses of Wales highlight what can be done when we stand together. I urge the Welsh Government to look very closely at the road map announced by the Prime Minister today, follow suit and provide some clarity and transparency at the earliest opportunity.

8.54 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I will use my short time to emphasise the critical importance of accurate information on local surge testing. At 5 o'clock on 1 February, the Health Secretary announced that the South African variant of coronavirus had been discovered in part of my constituency and that all residents of the CR4 postcode would be tested. By 5.15 pm, my inbox was full. The actual area being tested, Pollards Hill, covers a quarter of the postcode, but residents in Mitcham, Lavender, Cricket Green, Longthornton, and even Colliers Wood and part of Tooting, all rightly expected that they too would be tested. They heard terrifying warnings that they must stay at home, using tins at the back of the cupboard, despite no additional national lockdown rules applying.

Uncertainty spread rapidly right across CR4. Schools prevented vulnerable and key worker children from attending; nurseries and childminders closed; key workers stayed at home; Hotpoint refused to visit homes and repair washing machines, and Boots in Sutton refused to do eye tests for CR4 residents. People felt they were under house arrest even though they were not in the area to be tested.

While I sincerely thank each and every Pollards Hill resident who took a test—and I am grateful for the extraordinary operation conducted thanks to local volunteers, the New Horizon Centre, the NHS and Merton Council staff—I cannot stress more strongly to the Minister the importance of clear and accurate communications from the Government.

I also say to the Minister that people will take a test only if they can afford to self-isolate. Some 70% of people who should be self-isolating are not doing so. That is not just a chink in our armour but a gaping hole in our defence. Those on low incomes and in insecure work often cannot do their job from home and, quite simply, they will not get paid unless they go to work. In order to take a test, they need to be confident that they will have the money to feed their family and pay their bills.

The more people are spreading the virus, the more cases we have; the more cases we have, the more families who lose a loved one and the longer the lockdown and its consequences continue. A successful track and trace system is vital if the road map outlined today is to be met—and Minister, everybody wants it to succeed.

8.56 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Three minutes is barely enough time to do justice to the Government's mishandling of the pandemic, the vaccination programme excepted, but I will do my best.

From the outset, as the old adage goes, the Government failed to plan; the result they faced, failure. Precisely a year ago, the Prime Minister failed to attend not one, not two, but all of the first five Cobra meetings. Then there was the revelation that the previous Conservative Government had undertaken Exercise Cygnus, modelling and predicting the consequences of a pandemic, back in 2016. It was ignored, as were the calls by the scientists to lock down hard and early. Sadly, this Government do not do due diligence; otherwise, they would have followed the leadership and example of Sheffield City Council and its excellent locally delivered test and trace system. Instead, the Government blew £21 billion.

The farce that has been the Government's handling of PPE underlines that failure to do due diligence. UK companies such as Tecman and Contechs in my constituency—brilliant, agile small and medium-sized enterprises—can supply PPE. They are supplying it to Europe and elsewhere, shipping all they are manufacturing, while the UK Government source from China and Turkey at higher cost. Meanwhile, frontline NHS and care workers are denied FFP3-grade masks. This from a Government who claimed that staff were overusing PPE in the first few months of this crisis, and denied for the first eight months that the public needed to wear masks. Is it any wonder the public do not trust this Government?

Thankfully, the Government took options on vaccines. Credit to them for that, but the success of the roll-out is down to the universal healthcare provided by our fabulous NHS, and the use of our primary care networks and people such as Sukhi, Nick and Ollie driving local delivery. I now hear that, having finally realised that the NHS, and not Deloitte, Serco or others, was critical and central to meeting that challenge, the Government have appointed a private company to run their mega-lab in Leamington. I ask the Minister why.

While there is hope of arresting the health crisis, the Government need to do more to help businesses through the coming months, with more certainty. We do need dates, whether for extending the furlough scheme, for maintaining and simplifying grants, as called for by the Federation of Small Businesses, or for the extension of the business rates holiday or the cut to VAT on hospitality. There must be support for the 3 million self-employed excluded from Government programmes.

It is not enough to claim that there is light appearing. The Government need to provide protections for public health and the economy to secure and make certain our recovery, and they need to prioritise vaccinations for our teachers if they are really serious about schools returning.

8.59 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): Tomorrow marks 11 months since the Prime Minister first set out restrictions on our daily life here in Britain, so I welcome the road map he set out today, particularly for the hope it will give people that life will be able to return to normal and the ambition we have for June and July that there will be

no restrictions on social contact. He has set out a sensible and pragmatic approach. I also welcome in particular the priority given to schools.

The past year has been extraordinarily difficult, but it has also seen the best of my communities in East Surrey. I would like to pay tribute to some of their work. First, the Tandridge Voluntary Action group, which I met recently, set up a befriending contact system for people, with over 100 friendships across the constituency. Those friendships have been lifelines for people who otherwise would have experienced severe loneliness throughout the pandemic, and I know from talking to the volunteers that it has brought much happiness to both sides of the friendships.

I would also like to point out some people who have gone above and beyond in my constituency. Geoff Ledden has been running a community group to provide skincare for nurses packages to our local hospital, East Surrey Hospital, which means that, at the end of a long day at work, nurses have been able to use some welcome skincare products to deal with the daily trauma to the skin of using PPE. That is just one example; there are so many across East Surrey.

I also pay tribute to the brilliant work of the national vaccination programme, from the scientists in Oxford to Kate Bingham—with her brilliant venture capital experience, and unpaid for her role, she has secured us one of the best vaccine packages across the board—the healthcare officials, the officials in DHSC and the Ministers involved as well as all the volunteers on the ground. We have used our local community centres with great aplomb in East Surrey, from the Westway centre to the Centenary Hall in Smallfield, and we have had an army of volunteers supporting health care professionals to ensure that we can roll out the vaccine. Surrey Heartlands CCG has administered 250,000 vaccine doses so far, with 95% of over-70s given at least one jab to date. That is a tremendous record, which I am so proud of.

NHS staff—many of whom I seem to be related to, but I also have many in my constituency because of East Surrey Hospital—have had a tremendous, relentless year of hard work. I hope that in the months ahead, as we try to look forward to dealing with the NHS backlog, we also support the need for them to have some rest and recuperation.

9.2 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) [V]: It is all very well to bask in the success of the vaccination programme, but being in charge also means taking responsibility for things that go wrong and the response so far to the ruling of Justice Chamberlain does not suggest that the Government are ready to seize all their responsibilities. He pointed out:

“The secretary of state spent vast quantities of public money... The public were entitled to see who this money was going to, what it was being spent on, and how the... contracts were awarded.”

Whyever not?

I will focus on three areas. I look forward to hearing more about catch-up. I welcome plans for children to return to school but wonder if a rotation and phased approach might have been safer, given what happened last time. I am pleased Sir Kevan Collins has said that all ideas are on the table and I welcome his comments about sport, music and drama. I hope that catch-up will not simply mean cramming and further stress. I hope

[*Steve McCabe*]

there will be space for the needs of groups such as those with speech and language difficulties, who have lost out on so much. Perhaps some thought might still be given to whether it is possible to cancel this academic year and allow catch-up without extra pressures.

As the economy reopens, the Chancellor must provide support for businesses that remain closed and address the pressures that small businesses and the hospitality sector face over rents and will face over cash flow. I hope somebody will speak to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and urge her to reconsider the minimum income floor. It was suspended because it was an impediment to claiming universal credit. Reimposing it when people have no idea how much of their work might return means simply depriving people of money they need. Too many of the self-employed have already had a raw deal. Do not make things worse.

Finally, I want to mention the dental profession. We need a focus on preventive treatment and allowing time for dentists to use their skills in picking up issues such as early signs of cancer, promoting children's dental health—our pre-pandemic record on that was pretty grim—and taking action to preserve dental laboratories. A crude focus on units of dental activity will not achieve this, and the Government must work with the profession. Ministers sometimes say they want to build back better. That means accepting responsibility for things that have gone wrong and need putting right, as well as claiming credit for success.

9.5 pm

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): When I last spoke in a covid debate, the vaccine was approved, but we had not seen the 17 million doses that have gone into people's arms. My inbox across the past few weeks has been filled with wonderful stories of people finally getting that jolt of hope into their arm. I pay tribute to all those across Derbyshire who have been involved in one of the very best roll-outs in the country, and I think the very best in the midlands.

One of the things I wanted to address this evening is teachers and the vaccine. There have been calls for teachers to be pushed ahead of those groups that we have already identified, and I have to caution that I think it would be a very bad idea. That is not in any way to denigrate the brilliant teachers who have worked in incredibly difficult conditions through the past few months, and who work day in, day out to make our communities better. The decisions about who should receive the vaccine and why were made on a clinical basis. There is a very clear rationale, and I think any political tinkering in that process could be incredibly costly and questionable.

For all of us who have been living the lives of home schooling and working from home or with the toil and fear that people have been living through for the past few months, today's announcement from the Prime Minister, on which we are still reflecting, offers a tremendous pathway. There are certain sectors, which I have highlighted before, that have struggled particularly over the past few months such as hospitality, and the hair and beauty industries. I have been struck by how many have come to my constituency surgeries to highlight the difficulties they have faced and the wounding of their pride they

have felt through the difficulties over the past few months. I spoke to a pilot on Friday who has invested his life savings and his family's savings, and he is desperately worried about the aerospace industry. I would highlight someone who broke down in tears in my surgery, who just wants a little bit of help, and today's announcement offers a pathway out.

I will end by reflecting on the challenges that young people have faced over the past few months, be it with mental health or the incredible lost opportunities they have had, such as not being able to go and play football with their mates or whatever it may be. I think it is imperative that this Government make sure that young people have the best possible opportunities to catch up, because we cannot afford a lost generation, and we must do all we can to give back to those people who have suffered the most.

9.8 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: I want to start by thanking the incredible workers in the NHS who have delivered our brilliant vaccine roll-out, which has enabled us to start lifting some of the lockdown measures. While I welcome the road map laid out by the Prime Minister earlier, I add my voice to the many others today who have said that this lockdown must be the last. Sadly, however, we have been here before. The plans announced today that all pupils will return to English schools on 8 March shows that, once again, the Prime Minister has buckled under pressure from people within his own party and failed to listen to the science and learn the lessons of his previous mistakes. While it is welcome news that covid infection and hospitalisation rates are falling, the inconvenient fact remains that cases are three times higher now than when the schools reopened last September, and we still have regional variations. Just last month, the Prime Minister called schools, "vectors of transmission". Full reopening of schools will now bring nearly 10 million pupils and staff into circulation in England—close to one fifth of the population—and that is not a cautious easing of lockdown restrictions no matter how the Prime Minister tries to spin it.

Today, nine major education organisations, including trade unions representing staff working every day in schools and colleges across the country, called the Government's commitment to bring all children back to school at once "counterproductive and reckless". They called for a phased approach, as is being taken in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Will the Paymaster General please explain why England has taken a completely different approach from the other three nations? Will she agree to publish the scientific evidence that underpins this decision?

Neil, a primary school teacher in my constituency and chair of the schools network, said, "We want our schools fully open as soon as possible. However, we think that it might have been more sensible to begin with a staggered start from 8 March rather than straight full reopening. This would give an opportunity to the Government and SAGE to monitor on a weekly basis as we open for more year groups. The vaccination of school staff before the full reopening would be very helpful not only in helping staff to stay safe, but also in reducing community transmission." This is a direct comment from teachers working on the frontline in Liverpool Riverside.

As we have heard, Government scientists themselves have warned that a big bang return of all pupils to school at once could lead to the infection rate rising above 1. That risks the virus spreading exponentially and running out of control yet again. Instead of repeating their previous mistakes, will the Government follow the advice of scientists and teachers and take the same approach as the devolved nations and commit to a phased return to schools?

We are all aware of the desperate situation facing pupils and students who have now faced nearly a year of disruption to their education, drastically deepening inequalities—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Time is up.

9.12 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is always good to remind ourselves that hindsight makes people sound wiser than they actually are, following that speech.

I welcome the Prime Minister's statement today. For many, though, it will be a painful and drawn-out process and too long before we can sit down together with friends and family. I share the views that were expressed by my hon. Friends the Members for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), and for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) about the need to be able to look our constituents in the eye and to be able to reopen in a safe and orderly manner. We must also understand that the costs that will come in the coming weeks and months are likely to be very severe.

I want to talk about the hospitality sector. By the end of this process, when it is able to open up, it will have had more than 200 days out of action. The sector is a pillar of the UK economy. If we are to have an economic recovery and if we are able to build back better, then it will be on the back of the hospitality sector. We must do all we can to support its regrowth, its rebirth, and its reopening when the time comes. With that in mind, I hope that the Government will look carefully at extending the VAT extension to the end of this year and the business rates extension to next year. This is not simply a case of asking for more. It is about giving those businesses the breathing space to be able to recover. It is about giving them certainty to be able to create the business and the opportunity for new generations to go out and find employment to benefit our local economies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) wisely and accurately spoke for the younger generation, who have often been overlooked throughout this pandemic. People under the age of 45 have suffered dramatically over the course of this crisis. They have been asked to do the most. They have been unfairly portrayed by the media as snowflakes, as woke or whatever it is, but I have seen young people across this country stand up and volunteer and do everything that has been asked of them. We must return the favour to them now. We must create a landscape of opportunity, so that someone entering a job for the first time is given the support that they need, whether that be lower income tax, or an opportunity through the kickstart scheme. We must help university students who have seen their courses curtailed through virtual systems that do not work and do not give them the experience that

they so richly deserve. We can provide that for them, so that they can have the opportunity they expect in this country, in this economy, and the benefit that goes with all that.

I would like to finish with the fact that we are asking teachers on 8 March to return to their places of work and to teach children. We could serve as a very good example by doing the same. I am one of the handful of MPs who have not used the virtual system in any way. I have not used a proxy vote and I have not used the virtual system. If I may serve as an example of that, we need rigorous debate in this place. We need to hold the Government to account on all manner of things. It will do us justice if we can actually decide to have proper debate.

9.15 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: A year ago, covid-19 was a distant threat. Today, it has claimed more than 100,000 lives and damaged tens of thousands more in this country. In its wake, it has left us with the worst death rate in Europe and an ailing economy.

We all, I am sure, welcome the terrific progress that has been made in vaccinating millions of people. It is that vaccination programme that will protect us all in the future. It will help to protect our NHS from being overwhelmed in the way that, as we heard from the Minister, it almost was at the turn of the year. We need to protect and support our magnificent NHS staff, who have risked their own health on the frontline—many of them are foreign nationals with no guarantee that they will be able to stay—and those who look after mental health, which we know has come under immense pressure across the country.

I regret that I have to disagree with the hon. Members for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn). The picture that Scottish National party Members paint in this place of their Government's glorious success in leading the fight against covid-19 in Scotland and rolling out the vaccine north of the border is not, I am afraid, reflected in the daily calls I receive from constituents, as many others do, who watched the success down south and compared it with the delays we were encountering in Scotland. The people of Scotland, in my constituency and in many others, deserve much more respect for what they have endured and achieved in this past year. They deserve those of us who serve them to put all our attention, our sole focus, on recovering from the health and economic impact of this pandemic.

Tomorrow we are due to hear the latest unemployment figures and learn just how many jobs have been lost, and how many families are now paying the economic cost of the pandemic. The vaccine is crucial in fighting the health war, but we need a bold innovative plan next week from the Chancellor to rebuild and repair our economy to help the countless small businesses—retailers, florists, cafés, bars, taxi drivers—many of which are in my constituency of Edinburgh West. We need furlough extended and finally an acknowledgement of the thousands—no, millions—of people who have had no financial support at all in this crisis. Let us have no more patchwork reactions from the Chancellor, but a clear comprehensive plan for small businesses. The tourist industry, events, and our aviation sector, which is facing the biggest threat in its history, all need support.

[Christine Jardine]

My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) called for a resilience fund for our children and young people who have so often been forgotten. They need the best support we can offer. That must not end with the reopening of the schools; that is a step, not a solution.

We all want to see an end to lockdown and covid itself, to feel secure in our daily lives and be able to share them again with our families and friends. We have made progress, but we have so much more to do—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Sorry Christine. I call Jacob Young.

9.18 pm

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Today's announcement by the Prime Minister will come as a relief to so many. The outlining of a clear route out of lockdown was highly anticipated in my constituency and understandably so. The past months have been incredibly tough for people across the country, with businesses forced to remain closed, children unable to go to school and exhausted parents doing their best to home school while having to work from home. It has been a long and difficult road so far, yet never has there been so much hope. The roll-out of the vaccine, something we could not even imagine just six months ago, is progressing so rapidly that the UK is leading the world in the number of vaccinations, well ahead of our European neighbours.

On 23 January last year, the first known covid case landed in the UK. Tomorrow we will be 13 months on from that date, yet we have announced that 17.7 million people have received their first vaccine dose. We can often get lost in the frustration of being locked down and easily forget the remarkable achievements that we have made, that science has made, that the NHS has made, that Britain has made. Now that we hold three vaccines in our armour belt, we have the ammunition needed to defeat covid, and soon we will have more.

In Teesside, we will be producing the Novavax vaccine at Fujifilm in Billingham, proving that Teesside will be leading the world in innovation and technology once again. However, what we are missing in Teesside is our own mass vaccination centre. The 660,000 people who live in the Tees valley do not have a mass vaccine centre. For my constituents in Redcar and Cleveland, our nearest centre is 40 driving miles away in Sunderland. We have plenty of available sites. I have written to the vaccines Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), to endorse the Riverside stadium in Middlesbrough or Redcar racecourse in my constituency, which have both previously been testing sites for the Department of Health so will be familiar to the Government. Although I congratulate the Government on what can only be described as an incredible achievement so far, I urge Ministers to create more mass vaccine centres, including one in Teesside, to accelerate the roll-out even further so that we can all be protected much sooner.

It is very welcome news indeed that schools will be allowed to go back to near normal in just under two weeks' time, and even more welcome news that care home residents will once again be able to see their loved ones.

Covid has led to a deterioration of many care home residents due to the lack of human contact, so I am pleased that we are making this allowance. By the end of March, life will slowly start to feel as though we are getting back to normal, with the reintroduction of the rule of six. Between then and the middle of June, we will gradually start to get our freedoms back. I urge the Prime Minister to stick to his pledge of a one-way road to freedom. This road map gives us hope; let's stick with it.

9.21 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]: My constituency has the highest proportion of its workforce on furlough of any constituency in the entire United Kingdom. There has been a sixfold increase in unemployment, and it is obvious why. It is because hospitality and tourism is comfortably our biggest employer. We have the Lake district, the Yorkshire dales and vast swathes of Cumbria so beautiful that they could not find a national park to put them in. For the people working in those sectors, the reality is that many businesses have gone to the wall already. Many, many more have survived, and they have done so because of the support that they have received. That was a wise decision that the Government took 10 months or so ago as we entered the first lockdown.

I encourage the Government not to throw away that investment now by penny-pinching towards the end of this pandemic crisis. The simple reality is that, yes, furlough is of vast importance for so many businesses to be able to keep their heads above water, but perhaps a quarter to a third or even more of their outgoings is nothing to do with staff; it is other overheads that they simply have no income or savings left to fund. Those are the businesses that are going to the wall by the week now in Cumbria and other tourist hotspots around the country.

I urge the Government to do four things: first, to extend the business rates holiday; secondly, to extend the VAT cut; thirdly, to extend furlough and to say they are going to do it right now, not delay it until the Budget next week, because that confidence is what businesses lack, and that is what is pushing so many of them to the wall; and fourthly and finally, to provide a specific grant package to deal with the simple fact that without any income or any savings now many businesses, though they can see the light at the end of the tunnel, might not make it to the end of the tunnel.

I must also make a further plea. After 11 months, what is preventing the Chancellor of the Exchequer from investing something to support the 4,000 people in my constituency—and perhaps 3 million people around the country—who have been excluded from any kind of support whatever, and who now face destitution as they seek to pay the rent or the mortgage and to feed their kids? I am talking about those people who are self-employed, but have been so for less than two years, those who are directors of small limited companies, taxi drivers, hairdressers, personal trainers and the like. Why will the Government not support the excluded? It is not too late for them to do so.

Let me make a final, very local point. As we pay tribute to all those people doing everything they can to serve our communities at times like this, I think about people working in social care and public health as well

as the wider NHS, people working in schools, and people dealing with those who face housing need or who are looked after by our local authorities. Today Cumbria's local government has announced a plunge into a top-down restructuring; what a witless waste of everybody's time.

9.24 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [V]: I want to use the very short period of time available to me this evening to talk about one particular industry, based on a conversation I had with a local businessperson just this afternoon, and that is the wholesale sector.

For communities such as those in Orkney and Shetland, the wholesale sector provides a range of business services that goes well beyond the support of local retail businesses. Its operation, done from small family businesses, is vital to the efficient operation of our health service, our care homes and our schools. The Scottish Wholesale Association tells us that the pre-covid level of its businesses was some £2.9 billion, with 6,000 employees. In the last year, they have already lost 10% of their workforce. In the first lockdown, food service members of the SWA lost 80% of their business on average. For some, it was as high as 95%. After the ending of that lockdown and the easing of restrictions, they restocked and started up their businesses again, only for many of them to find that the tier system then slowly strangled their operation. Currently, food service wholesalers are operating at 30% of their pre-covid levels.

To give credit where it is due, the Scottish Government introduced the Scottish wholesale food and drink resilience fund—a lifeline for the 40 or so businesses that were able to take advantage of it—but even then, they did not reach every business that needed the help. It was supposed to be a six-month package, but it has been overtaken by events. It has become a three-month package because, with no or very few sales in January and February, the support from that fund has effectively become those businesses' sales; it has not been the reserve that it was supposed to be for fixed costs. The SWA is now looking for an immediate top-up of the fund in the region of £50 million, and that is needed now, not in the next financial year.

I have spoken about the wholesale sector, but I could have spoken about many others. I could have talked about the hospitality and visitor economy; the same thing would have been true. As my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) said, we are coming to a point where the continuation of lifelines such as the furlough scheme and business support grants will be crucial. If we do not keep these lifelines going, frankly, we have to wonder why they were put in place at all.

9.27 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): In anticipation of the Prime Minister's statement earlier, and realising that I could not last another two months without a haircut, I took matters into my own hands last night—granted, after a gin and tonic.

The Prime Minister was cautious but optimistic today. He struck the right balance in what he said and in the length of time he set out. Many people, including myself, would like to go a bit quicker, but it is right that we take a measured approach. As I have said many times in recent weeks, it is great that the vaccine programme is

rolling out and that we have light at the end of the tunnel, but how long is that tunnel? Now we know. In 49 days' time, we will start to be able to see our loved ones—our family and our friends. Everyone in this Chamber and out there has gone far too long without that, especially those of us in the north, where we have had restrictions on us since July.

I want to put on record my thanks to all those across Radcliffe, Whitefield and Prestwich who have helped to get people through the vaccination programme. For every 200 people who have been injected, one life has been saved, and if we can save one life, that makes everything worth while.

I also thank everyone who has been vaccinated. It has been a step into the unknown and there has been the big question, "Is this the right thing?" They have made the right choice to get vaccinated and make sure that it is safe not only for them, but for everyone else.

In the small amount of time I have left, I want to touch on a few issues that are particularly important to me. I raised one of these in a recent business question in regard to children's mental health. We have had schools closed now for half a term already. The fact that children can go back to school in a couple of weeks from today and start seeing their friends and addressing some of their missed schooling and education, will do wonders for their mental health. I echo the comments of Members on both sides of the Chamber that we need to do more. While the catch-up premium is a magnificent policy that is being brought forward, we need to think about what we can do to tackle our children's mental health so that they not only learn but are healthy in doing so.

The last topic that I want to address is domestic abuse. We have seen cases rise drastically throughout lockdown, and I fear that when lockdown is lifted, we will see a further increase in those seeking help from domestic abuse services. If I can put one final plea to the Minister, it is to make sure that there is funding available for those services post-lockdown.

9.31 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con) [V]: This is a good moment to highlight the great national and local effort to implement an extraordinary vaccination programme that I saw in action at the Rosebank Health surgery in Gloucester on Saturday. It is right that we highlight the great leadership and great staff from the NHS and GP networks who delivered this. I want to highlight the volunteers—the hairdresser, the beautician, the police civilian, the retired doctor, the optician and some Rotarians—who were involved that day. However, this evening, I also want to highlight the message from some of my BAME constituents from different communities—Gujarati Indian, Jamaican and west African—who have been vaccinated. All of them have highlighted to others in their communities the importance of being vaccinated, the fact that it was simple, quick, well organised and painless, and, above all, that it will make our city and country safer from future infections if everyone is vaccinated.

Today's announcement had the great confirmation that almost all education will go back on 8 March. It is hard to tell whether the parents or the children are more excited about this, but thereafter, progress is slow. There are another three weeks, for example, before two people, even from the same household, can exercise outdoors

[Richard Graham]

with a golf club. Let me share this message from one mother about the importance of outdoor exercise. She wrote about her son who had come close to taking his life, about how important golf was for him. She said that it gave an area of light, hope and pleasure to help him out of a pit of despair. All over the country, there will be people fighting similar demons for whom some outdoor sport represents a lifeline, promoting good physical health while magically mending hearts and souls, which will also impact on their family—their partners, parents and children. I hope that the Government will hear that message and consider carefully whether restrictions on outdoor sport—as important for people who have left school as for those who are still at school—can be lifted earlier.

I supported the third lockdown because I knew how close our hospital was to being overwhelmed, but it is also right to recognise now what has changed. We have the same number with the virus in our hospital as in an average year from flu, so I hope that the Prime Minister, driven by the data, will consider carefully the possibility of unlocking earlier if the data shows that.

9.33 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The most telling aspect of today's debate is the focus on specifics rather than on principle, on trends in data and details of subsidy rather than the eager pursuit of freedom, on continuing comfort with the state making choices for us rather than a clamour by us for the freedom to be responsible for ourselves. As Oxford University ranks the stringency of the UK's response the fourth most restrictive in the world after Cuba, Eritrea and Ireland, this absence is telling. One year ago, few of us would have suggested that the state could ban people from leaving their home, from leaving the country, from getting married, or from touching a loved one in their final moment, or that it could stop a child receiving education or keep an elderly person living alone from the comfort of a neighbourly chat over a cup of tea. Do we fully appreciate the scale of what we have done?

This has been a year of ambiguous choices, when each of us in Parliament has had to wrestle with our conscience to render judgments with many unknowns, yet each of us, rightly or wrongly, has allowed essential freedoms to lapse and thus been party to the creation of a new illiberal precedent that may imperil the meaning of liberty for decades to come.

We should each reflect on our judgments to determine how we can repair our common heritage of freedom. The House should reflect on whether it has provided effective legislative scrutiny and whether casting Members away gave too much allowance for Executive decree. We should reflect on whether the experiment of remote technology has substituted a pretence for the substance of scrutiny, parading a Potemkin Parliament as the real thing.

Ministers should reflect on whether speed of response became an excuse, rather than a genuine requirement for presumptive Executive action and whether the drift towards lawmaking without the sharing of adequate data and without questioning or accountability with Parliament became a lazy path routinely chosen for convenience, rather than need.

The Opposition should consider why their response to the greatest power grab by the state has been to demand more state, more restriction and more control. They made a series of cynical, tactical moves designed to wrongfoot Government mid-crisis, at best setting out a vision of even greater repression and control while heightening public fears and worry.

I and my colleagues on the Government Back Benches should reflect on whether a more vigorous defence of our liberties was called for, and if so, why we did not heed that call. For our citizens, we should ask to what purpose we removed those liberties a year ago and for what purpose we are withholding those liberties yet further today.

The decision has not been so much one of medical necessity, but rather of a presumed political necessity. We should reflect candidly and fearlessly on whether the accumulated costs in diminished livelihoods, debts, school closures, misdiagnoses, loneliness and lives lost as a result of these measures have been worth the reduction in covid deaths and the avoidance of an annual rate of death for our population that was commonplace and went unremarked barely two decades ago. Whatever the conclusions of our reflections, we must now resolve together to lead the recovery of these liberties with every moment and every strength we have.

9.36 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: Hopefully we can all now see the end of the pandemic ahead with the successful vaccine roll-out and today's road map out of lockdown. I am delighted that schools will welcome back the remainder of their pupils in just two weeks' time.

Cases here in North Devon are among the lowest in the country, and that is thanks to the people of North Devon diligently following the rules, combined with our beautiful wide open spaces, which we are desperate to be allowed to enjoy more often. We also look forward to welcoming tourists to visit us again later this spring. While locally we might have been ready to enjoy sporting endeavours outside earlier than under today's road map, we understand that the national unlock will make welcoming back visitors that much easier.

I very much hope that today's cautious unlocking will enable businesses to plan. As the self-appointed one-woman tourist board for North Devon, I also hope that people are rushing to book their summer holidays with us. Croyde, Woolacombe, South Molton and Barnstaple are all taking bookings now that the opening dates are at least pencilled in.

This Government have given unprecedented support to businesses to enable them to survive the pandemic. However, a number of business in North Devon will be reliant on the additional support we hope the Chancellor will announce next week. The hospitality sector, which is vital to North Devon's economy, will have lost several weeks of their key trading period, which starts each Easter, having already lost so much of last year. Local hospitality supply businesses Savona and Philip Dennis are hanging on by their fingertips, with their main customers remaining mostly closed for so many more weeks. Key tourist destinations, such as Exmoor zoo, and the most popular attraction in North Devon, the Lynton and Lynmouth cliff railway, will lose their vital Easter period, but are well worth a visit the second they reopen their

doors. Our lovely theatres, the Landmark in Ilfracombe and Queen's in Barnstaple, still have many more weeks before pulling their curtains up.

The North Devon family-run coach businesses Taw and Torridge Coaches and Streets Coachways have not received adequate support through the pandemic, but I am sure they are also now taking bookings if Members fancy a coach trip to see us this summer. Country Cousins, the English language school in my constituency, does not see a secure future despite today's announcement. They will all be looking to next week's Budget to ensure they are all still there to welcome back visitors to North Devon when their turns to open up come.

9.39 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I see much to welcome in today's announcement. There is, at last, a pathway of hope and a pathway that, although it might not be as quick as some of us might like, does give us a vision of how we can get back to normality in the not too distant future. I welcome that because, let us be honest, as MPs we have been contacted by thousands of constituents, many of whose mental health has been shattered by this lockdown and by the last year. We need to reflect on that and on the different ways in which our children's education has been severely disrupted.

One plea on a specific point is that when we think about the catch-up strategy, particular attention is paid to those with special educational needs—not only those who have been eligible to come into school and who have an education, health and care plan, but those who have dyslexia or dyspraxia and have been severely negatively impacted by the closure of schools. No one child's experience has been the same: some have done okay through home learning, but some have struggled immensely and some of those children have had dyslexia and some have had dyspraxia. They are not necessarily conventional learners, although they often do quite well in exams, because they can pull a rabbit out of a hat. Part of the catch-up strategy needs to be a real focus on those with special educational needs and how we can help them.

The vaccination programme in Ipswich has been a great success. Suffolk has vaccinated more people than almost any county in the country. I will always remember my visits to every single vaccination centre operating in Ipswich, of which there are five. I remember two in particular. The first was Gainsborough sports centre, where I saw hundreds of my constituents lining up with hope in their eyes—hope that they were going to get their lives back and see their loved ones again. Then there was Ivry Street medical centre, this Friday, where the practice manager proudly told me that, going into the new year, his practice alone had vaccinated more people than the entirety of France. That probably explains why President Macron was so unnerved and made those completely unevenced comments about our fantastic vaccine.

Like every Member in this House, I have been deeply challenged by the last year, and deeply challenged by the decisions we make and their implications, and I do not take that lightly for a moment. We now have in front of us a road map to when we can see our loved ones again and build up our businesses. Ipswich will be at the heart of that, because I strongly believe that some of the best characteristics have been shown in the town that I have the honour of representing, and I think we can make a success of the recovery.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Andy, I will stop you at 9.44 pm—just carry on talking until I stop you.

9.42 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con) [V]: Thank you for bringing me in, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt).

I suspect that for most parents listening to the Prime Minister's announcement earlier, the news that all children will be back in school from 8 March is very welcome—not because we have had too much of the little cherubs appearing midway through Zoom calls, but because the best place for children to be is in school with their friends, socialising and learning. Having listened to my son's virtual lessons over the past few weeks, I suspect that most teachers will also be delighted to have children back in one place, focused on the lesson and not distracted by whatever else is going on in their bedrooms.

I pay particular tribute to the hugely professional teachers who have adapted to a blended Teams and Zoom world through ever-changing circumstances. The ongoing uncertainty has created significant anxiety for young people, with particular pressure for those due to take exams this year and next. The focus on catch-up and support funding for mental health is now critical, and I request that the Secretary of State for Education allows flexibility in the way that schools deliver those programmes.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the efforts of mums and dads across Warrington who have been home-schooling while also working and doing all the other things that are necessary for life to continue.

I welcome the news that the Chancellor will address support for businesses in the Budget next week. I make one specific request: extend the business rates holiday for eligible small businesses.

Finally, the incredible vaccination programme both here in Warrington and throughout the UK has meant that we can have some certainty around a route out of lockdown. Having visited four of the five vaccination centres in Warrington over the last few weeks—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Sorry, Andy. It was short but sweet.

9.44 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to close this debate for the Opposition.

There have been very good contributions on both sides of the House; I cannot cover them all, but want to highlight a few. First, on this side of the House, my hon. Friends the Members for Easington (Grahame Morris), for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), and for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) made excellent points about the inequalities in our country that covid has highlighted, and I will cover that in my contribution, as I will isolation pay, which was mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood).

Excellent points were made about exams and education by my hon. Friends the Members for Newport West (Ruth Jones) and for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe). There was welcome cross-party consensus

[Alex Norris]

about the need to extend and improve business and tourism and travel support from the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), the hon. Members for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) and for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), and the hon. Members for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) and for North Devon (Selaine Saxby).

Colleagues on the other side of the House also made important points about the NHS: the hon. Members for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), as well as the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), latterly regarding children with special educational needs.

It is a feature of today that the Prime Minister has rather stared down the caution to the wind group on his own Back Benches, and there were contributions from some of those colleagues—the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), the hon. Members for Bolton West (Chris Green), for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) and for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller)—again with some sort of agreement, but generally pointing at the fact that they do not agree, and frankly they have been wrong the rest of the way so what is one more to complete the set? Finally, the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards) made the excellent point that a new, improved and exceptionally promising vaccine is being developed at the University of Nottingham, showing once again that things are just that little bit better in Nottingham.

On the day on which the Prime Minister has outlined the future road map, there is rightly a sense of optimism, but in that context we cannot forget the terrible toll this last year has had on our country. Across the UK, over 120,000 people have lost their lives to covid-19; that is a tragically high number of lost loved ones, and the impact is felt everywhere across every community. That is an awful lot of empty places at the table and lots of grief that will last a lifetime.

The roll-out of the vaccine is a beacon of hope and a source of national pride. It shows once again the strength of our national health service. I thank everyone involved in that programme—we are very lucky to have them—and it stands in contrast, I am afraid, to the failures of the test and trace system, which has had to be propped up in recent months by the interventions of local authorities. These two events together show us that a decade of selling off public services is not what we needed in the past 10 years and is certainly not what we are going to need in the next 10 years.

However, even following a long statement and a four-hour debate there remain a few points to resolve. The Opposition have a number of constructive ideas that we think would strengthen the nation's efforts, and I hope the Paymaster General will be able to address them in her closing remarks.

Sick pay and isolation support need to be fixed. Without that, the Government's plans to roll out millions of lateral flow tests as we reopen will be useless. The news that only three in 10 people who have a positive

diagnosis self-isolate should scare us all; imagine how much more quickly and effectively we could manage this virus if that figure was 100%, or even somewhere in the middle. Again, the lack of news today from the Prime Minister on this was a glaring miss and a significant hole in the fence. I hope that there might be more news from the Paymaster General.

However, that lack of support has been the reality for all those 3 million people who have been excluded from the Government's financial support all year. It is worrying, surprising and quite hard to understand that the Chancellor has yet to heed their calls and make the simple creative amendments necessary to plug the gaps in these schemes and relieve their anxiety. I understand that as these schemes needed to be created at pace there may have been gaps, but I cannot understand, a year on, why we have not acted to close them. Again, the message was wait for the Budget, but they have been told, "Demand, demand, demand" for a long time. They have real-life costs to meet and are stretched to their limits, so I hope that there will be good news for them shortly.

I hope the Minister can clarify something for indoor hospitality. We are told that that will be opening up, but not before 17 May. That will be a month after business rates resume and two weeks after furlough. Will there be news for them about how that gap will be bridged?

Of course, the big and welcome news is the reopening of schools. That is a collective priority across this place. We now must use the time available to do this as safely as possible. It is a shame that the Government resisted our calls to vaccinate teachers; however, in the absence of that, will the right hon. Lady at least commit to working with the sector to deliver a credible plan for getting all the pupils back into school, with mass testing, better ventilation, Nightingale classrooms where possible, and reviewing financial support for covid adaptations? Our schools have done an incredible job throughout this pandemic. They have never actually shut—they are open as we speak—and they have had to do that by being very creative, but we should not ask them to be creative alone; in order to get things back to normal we have to help them. Those are immediate steps that, if taken, would lead to a significant improvement in our country's attempt to beat this virus, and I hope the right hon. Lady will take them in the spirit intended.

Multiple references were made to the alarming news that the Health Secretary broke the law earlier in the pandemic. The Prime Minister seemed to have no concern about this, which in itself is quite worrying. I will not rehash that point, but I will ask the Paymaster General, as a minimum, in the interests of decent government and in line with British values, to commit to publishing the details of the VIP lane schemes and how they are used. The Prime Minister has total confidence that everything is appropriate, so I think it might be time to share that information so that we might all have some of that confidence.

As we seek to safely navigate these next few months, we have to learn the lessons not only of the past 12 months but of the previous decade. Covid has thrived on the deep inequalities and injustices in our country. Building back is not what we need; we need to be genuinely different. The pandemic has shown that profound inequality is not just bad for those on the sharp end of it, but bad for everybody. It has shown too that some communities in our country have thrived while others

have struggled to get by. People who live in one of the poorest communities are twice as likely to die, and people from minority ethnic groups have an increased risk of 50%. We could also say that about their access to decent housing and about whether they have to leave their community to access better employment chances. These inequalities exist across our lives, and that is the legacy of 11 years of choices made by this Government. These groups have paid the real price for the 2008 economic crash, which they did not cause. As we face the future and choose what comes next, we must not repeat those mistakes, so I hope to hear from the Minister today that there will be a break from the past decade and that that will be replicated in the upcoming Budget.

9.51 pm

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): I would like to thank all Members who have contributed to today's debate, as well as my hon. Friends the Members for Bracknell (James Sunderland), for West Dorset (Chris Loder), for Keighley (Robbie Moore), for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), for North West Durham (Mr Holden), for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell), for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) and for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), who wanted to contribute but who were not called due to lack of time. I also want to echo the many voices in the Chamber this afternoon who have praised our fantastic NHS and social care workforce, our key workers and carers and all the volunteers who are providing assistance through the pandemic. They are seeing us through the greatest health crisis in a generation. I also want to thank every member of the British public; they have made huge sacrifices in the past year in the battle against covid-19.

I want to start by addressing the comments many Members have made about people with learning disabilities and their carers. Often, when we think of care homes, we tend to think of older people. When we say "social care", we do not think about people of working age. When we say "carers", we do not think about the army of informal carers out there, and when we think of residential care, we do not think of mental health settings or of people with learning disabilities or behavioural disabilities. The hon. Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), for Gower (Tonía Antoniazzi), and for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) all raised the issue of people with learning disabilities. I want to pay tribute to campaigners, including Jo Whiley and her sister Frances, and Ciara Lawrence from Mencap, who have done a huge amount to raise the needs of people with learning disabilities and who also help the Cabinet Office in our communications with those people.

Hon. Members have raised several issues and I am going to ask the Department for Health and Social Care to respond directly to those wider issues raised about group six, but I would say that statements had been made and policy is very clear around the blanket use of DNRs. That is totally unacceptable, and the Care Quality Commission's review is going to report in March—next month—so we will not have long to wait for its work. All of us can help in this, and certainly if I as a constituency MP encounter somebody who I feel should have a vaccine, I encourage them to go and talk to their GP. It is our job to stand up for those people. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) pointed to

the plight of people with a learning disability who have to be outside a school setting. I have huge sympathy with this. This summer, at the age of 47, I was diagnosed with very severe dyslexia, and I know that distance learning and working from home can really exacerbate the difficulties.

I want to turn to the raft of issues that have been raised around data and dates, and whether we are going to unlock too late to build up resistance going into the winter. I want to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), and also my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), whom I should like to thank for the work he is doing on the vaccine roll-out. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) also raised these issues. I point them to the SPI-M SAGE modelling, which looked at the options of unlocking earlier and concluded that we might end up in a situation where we would be peaking in excess deaths in excess of what we experienced in April last year. This plays into comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) about the backdrop of this against the vaccination programme and whether it makes sense to unlock so late while the vaccination programme has gone on. That modelling did build in the vaccination programme, including the speed of roll-out and the likely take-up. A pack was placed in the House of Commons Library at 3.30 this afternoon with all this information in, and I encourage colleagues to go to look at it.

I thank the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for the work she is doing on volunteering on the vaccination programme, and I pass my sympathies on to the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for her recent loss. They both raised the very important issue of the under-vaccinated in the BAME community, which is of huge concern and is being taken into account. Directors of public health are monitoring the take-up by ethnic group, and the UK covid-19 vaccine uptake plan and the vaccination equalities committee, which is bringing together directors of public health, local authorities, faith and community groups, are completely focused on this. The only way through it is to ensure that take-up in those community groups improves.

Many Members, including the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) and for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), raised the issue of ongoing support for business. I encourage colleagues to lobby the Chancellor heavily, and we will not have long to wait to hear about that additional support. I wish particularly to focus on the plight of businesses in the constituency of the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who are stuck between a rock and a hard place, in the form of the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. I undertake to ensure that those issues are addressed.

[Penny Mordaunt]

I wish to comment on two issues raised by the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). I completely agree with the comments he made about the validation of the NHS and the system we have—our universal healthcare system, not linked to employment—and how fantastic that has been. However, I think the past 12 months have also been a validation of the excellence in the private sector, and in the third and social sectors, from manufacturers and inventors, to services and support, and of course the social care sector, 70% of which is in the independent sector. Our citizens would be much better off if we in this place focused on getting good outcomes for taxpayers' money and not on outdated dogma. I also add that attempts this afternoon to paint the Health Secretary as some sort of criminal mastermind are likely to fail.

Finally, I wish to touch on comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), which were echoed in comments made by my hon. Friends the Members for Winchester, for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) and for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller). This is really about how we live with this virus, and how we recover and return to normality after such trauma and distortion for our way of life. First, I would like to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne that the chief medical officer and his colleagues do focus on ethics a great deal; they are decent, compassionate people who are also directly affected by this virus. People are anxious about the virus and the disease. They are anxious about enforcement, and this is layered on to the huge responsibilities that they feel—responsibilities towards those they care for and those they employ. I know that that results in great stress and strain.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) and the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) also focused on the plight that young people, in particular, are facing. This is not lost on me or on my hon. Friend the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, and we have been working across government on mental health support, which we will bring forward shortly.

In concluding, I will say that we will get through this. I know that we will because I have seen what the public have done over the last 12 months. They have been stoic and heroic. We must focus on the future with as much determination, grit, compassion and care as we have over the last 12 months. The road map is a plan, but, as my hon. Friends the Members for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards), for Redcar (Jacob Young) and for Ipswich pointed out, it is also hope. This debate has served as a reminder to us all of what is required for us to fulfil that hope and to repay the trust that the public put in us when they sent us here.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered covid-19.

Business without Debate

ADJOURNMENT (EASTER)

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

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 25 March, do adjourn until Tuesday 13 April 2021.—(*David Duguid.*)

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

INCOME TAX

That the draft Scottish Rates of Income Tax (Consequential Amendments) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 11 January, be approved.—(*David Duguid.*)

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (AGRICULTURE)

That the draft Fertilisers and Ammonium Nitrate Material (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 9 December, be approved.—(*David Duguid.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Zarah Sultana be discharged from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and Sarah Owen be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Feryal Clark and Alex Sobel be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Dan Carden and Helen Hayes be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Abena Oppong-Asare and Paul Holmes be discharged from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and Florence Eshalomi and Andrew Lewer be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

JUSTICE COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Richard Burgon be discharged from the Justice Committee and Janet Daby be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Navendu Mishra be discharged from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and John McDonnell be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Darren Jones be discharged from the Science and Technology Committee and Rebecca Long-Bailey be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE ARMED FORCES BILL

Motion made,

That Stuart Anderson, Tonia Antoniazzi, Dan Carden, Leo Docherty, Martin Docherty-Hughes, Darren Henry, Mrs Sharon Hodgson, Mr Richard Holden, Mr Kevan Jones, Jack Lopresti, Johnny Mercer, Carol Monaghan, Stephen Morgan, Dr Andrew Murrison, James Sunderland and Mrs Heather Wheeler be members of the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Objection taken.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con) [V]: If people do object, it would be helpful if they let me know.

TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Sam Tarry be discharged from the Transport Committee and Ben Bradshaw be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Terminally Ill People: Access to Benefits

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

10.4 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I have brought this debate to the House tonight to urge the Government to announce the results of their review of how the benefits system treats the terminally ill. The review was announced over 19 months ago now, on 11 July 2019, in response to campaigning by charities Marie Curie, the Motor Neurone Disease Association and others. I pay tribute to those charities for all their work on this issue and their support for me in bringing forward my ten-minute rule Bill, the Welfare (Terminal Illness) Bill, last summer. I also thank individual campaigners like Mark Hughes, Dave Setters and so many others who have continued to make a compelling case for change. The same is true of my friend Madeleine Moon, the former MP for Bridgend, who did so much good work on this issue during her time as chair of the all-party party group on motor neurone disease. She had first-hand experience of the mental and emotional toil that comes with supporting a loved one with terminal illness. The Bill she brought to the House on this issue in 2018 is the inspiration for the Bill that I brought forward last summer. I have no doubt that the pressure exerted by these and other extraordinary individuals and organisations was instrumental in pushing the Government into announcing the review in July 2019.

So on their behalf, I again call on the Government today to take urgent action on two elements of the special rules for terminal illness guidelines that are not fit for purpose: the six-month rule, which means that someone is obliged to provide medical proof that they have six months or less to live so that they can access benefits quickly, more sensitively and at a higher rate; and the three-year award, which forces terminally ill people to reapply for benefits in the minority of cases where they are lucky enough to live longer than three years after the benefit is awarded. The special rules for terminal illness process is intended to enable people who are terminally ill to access benefits such as the personal independence payment or universal credit rapidly at the highest level of payments without going through the standard application process. Claiming under the special rules requires the person's doctor, consultant or specialist nurse to submit a DS1500 form stating that the person is reasonably likely to die within six months. That forces people who have unpredictable terminal illnesses such as motor neurone disease or those expected to live longer than six months to apply via the standard claims process, which involves filling in long forms, attending assessments, delays in payment, lower rates, and even meeting work coaches—all while waiting months for payments. Clearly, that is highly inappropriate for people who have been given the devastating news that their condition is terminal.

The six-month rule is flawed and urgently needs to change. The all-party party group for terminal illness, chaired by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), found in its 2019 report that it was outdated and arbitrary with no basis in clinical reality. This six-month hard deadline is too much to ask of carers and claimants. It creates a completely understandable resistance to applying, prompting the

[Jessica Morden]

added pain of writing down the grim reality of daily life and the inevitable future darkness. It gives no hope, no joy in life in a world where hope and joy are often all that can keep you going. In the case of unpredictable illnesses like MND, heart and lung failure and many neurological conditions, it is all but impossible for clinicians to make an accurate prediction of life expectancy. It is little wonder that nearly a third of clinicians told the all-party group that they have never signed a DS1500 form for a patient with a non-cancer condition. That means that patients like Simon, who was diagnosed with MND in December 2020, are not able to access the special rules. His wife Nichola told the MND Association:

“The doctor said that the DS1500 was designed for cancer patients...He looked at Simon and said ‘you won’t be dead in six months’. We had to complete the whole form and apply under the standard rules. It’s so long winded, so time consuming because you just don’t think about how long you spend on helping him get dressed etc. People need that support...often it feels like you’re banging your head against the wall.”

This unpredictability is why the three-year award also needs to change. Half of all people with motor neurone disease, for example, die within two years of being diagnosed, while only around 10% live for more than five years, but there is no reliable way for doctors to determine who that 10% will be, and, as with many progressive illnesses, their condition has no prospect of improvement and will only deteriorate further as time goes on. Emma Saysell, from the wonderful St David’s Hospice in Newport, tells me it is seeing more and more cases of cancer patients having to reapply for benefits with the DS1500 after three years. That comes in part due to improvements that have been made in palliative treatment, but while patients are living longer, they are still living with a terminal illness.

One particular example St David’s presented to me was of a lady in her mid-40s diagnosed with advanced breast cancer. The lady’s prognosis at diagnosis was very poor, and she had two teenage children. It was quite right to submit the DS1500 at diagnosis. Her disease is still progressing, but due to the palliative chemotherapy she has received, the process has been slowed, and she has now lived longer than three years. She has recently had to reapply for all her benefits due to the three-year rule, which has been hugely stressful for her and her family.

It is a clear anomaly that terminally ill people are awarded benefits for only three years. Employment and support allowance claimants with progressive conditions are entitled to the severe conditions exemption, meaning that they do not have to repeat work capability assessments, while higher-rate PIP claimants can qualify for an ongoing award, with a light-touch review after the 10-year point. It is cruel and absurd that people living with a lifelong condition are entitled to a 10-year or lifetime award, while those with terminal illnesses have been told they must reapply for benefits or risk losing them after just three years. Those who do happen to live longer than three years tell me they feel they are being punished by the system for living too long.

It is now seven months to the day since I presented my ten-minute rule Bill, and more than 19 months since the then Secretary of State, Amber Rudd, announced a review of how the benefits system treats terminally ill people. In all that time, we have had no official word

from the Government on when they intend to bring forward these vital and long-awaited changes to the benefit system.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for the campaigning work she has been doing on this issue for an extended period, following the work that Madeleine Moon was doing. Scotland introduced its changes to SRTI back in 2018. Does my hon. Friend agree that it seems very late for the Government here not to have done anything about it? This is all about funding people who desperately need money in the last few months of their lives.

Jessica Morden: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution, and he reads my mind—I am just about to come to that section of my speech. This is an issue across the whole UK, and the devolved Governments of Scotland and Northern Ireland appear to be treating it as a higher priority than the UK Government do. The Scottish Government passed a law to change the six-month rule for devolved benefits back in 2018, and that will be coming into force later this year. The Northern Ireland Assembly unanimously backed a motion to scrap it in October, and the Executive are proactively looking to fix this issue and deliver reform quickly. Why, then, is Westminster dragging its heels?

When I introduced my Bill last July, the Minister for Disabled People, Welfare and Work indicated that change would be coming shortly. He confirmed in the House on 19 October last year that the Government would be changing the six-month rule following their review. However, all this time later, we are still waiting to hear exactly what it would be changed to and when that change will be introduced. If Ministers have made up their minds that change is needed, why is there any need for further delay? Why the long silence?

Every day the Government postpone an announcement on the outcome of their review, more people are diagnosed with a terminal illness and risk being unable to get fast-track support from the benefits system if they cannot prove they have less than six months to live. These people are facing exactly the kind of inappropriate medical and work capability assessment that the special rules for terminal illness are supposed to exempt them from before they can access the support they need. They also face huge delays in getting payments. The average wait for a first personal independence payment is now 16 weeks, at a time when someone’s illness may mean that they cannot work and have no other money coming in. These are people like Alan, who has terminal pulmonary fibrosis, and who told Marie Curie:

“When I was diagnosed, I was told I would have five years’ life expectancy, as an average. Day to day, it affects everything I do. I can’t get dressed by myself. I can’t go to the shop by myself. I get very breathless doing anything. When I first applied for PIP, they were very dismissive. One of the things they did was, because I walked from a lift to a room, which was about 10 steps—on that basis they judged I could walk 200 yards. Because I was refused PIP, I couldn’t get hold of things like a parking card or a discount for train travel. So, I was in receipt of no benefits at all, although I do have a terminal illness, which gets worse year after year, month to month.”

For some, that delay will mean they die without receiving any support at all. Between April 2018 and October 2019, 2,140 people who applied for PIP—only one of the benefits affected by this rule—had their claim turned down under the normal rules only to die within six months

of making their claim. Many of them will have been terminally ill people unable to claim via the special rules because they could not prove they had six months to live.

Even when the DWP does accept a claim, that often comes too late. According to the DWP's own figures, an average of 10 people die every day while waiting for a decision on their PIP claim. End-of-life charity Marie Curie estimates that that means more than 5,900 people have died waiting for a decision since the DWP announced its review. That is nearly 6,000 families put through needless distress and anguish, and more will face it every day because of a rule that the Government have already admitted needs to change.

That is families like Michelle's. Her mum, who died aged 62 in 2018, was initially awarded zero points for PIP and told she was capable of working. She was hooked to a feeding tube 16 hours a day, seven days a week and weighed 32 kilograms when she died. She had several illnesses including Crohn's, osteoporosis and terminal lung cancer, yet she was awarded nothing. Michelle took her mum's case to a tribunal, but by the time the decision came back that her mother should be awarded maximum points for PIP, she had died. Michelle says:

"This should have been money that my mum had to make her final days better. It should never have gone as far as a tribunal."

Dying people deserve to be treated with dignity by the benefits system. Nobody given the devastating news that their illness is terminal knows how long they have left—not their loved ones, not their doctor and not a DWP benefits assessor. However much time they have left should be spent living as well as they can for as long as they can, making memories with loved ones. It should not be spent worrying about money, filling in endless forms, being dragged to assessments and fighting for the support they need. As Madeleine Moon said back in 2018,

"The unknown time you have must not be spent worrying about accessing benefits or keeping a roof over your head; it must be spent in love, laughter, and taking the painful journey together with dignity and compassion."—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 456.]

People living with terminal illness and their loved ones have been campaigning tirelessly for change for more than two years. Many of them will not have lived to see the change they have fought for: an end to the six-month and three-year rules and a change to the system to allow anyone who has received the devastating news from a clinician that they are terminally ill to get fast-tracked access to benefits via the special rules. The clinician's judgment should be evidence enough.

We all understand that since the Government announced their review there have been unforeseen circumstances with covid-19, but people do not have time to wait further. For the past 19 months, they have been waiting in a frustrating limbo, told that change is coming but with no announcement in sight from Ministers. They, and the charities campaigning on their behalf, are understandably impatient with 19 months of warm words from the Government and promises that change is always coming soon. For many, soon is already too late and, with each day that passes, soon will be too late for many more.

I urge Ministers to do better than soon. Will the Minister give us a date today for when the outcome of the DWP review will be published, give the campaigners

who have called for change some clarity and give us a timeline setting out when the Government will make the changes to the law, which they have already accepted are needed, without further delay?

10.18 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): I will first pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). There is little in her powerful and constructive speech that I can disagree with. She demonstrated that with her private Member's Bill, which could have had a second hearing but for the recent suspension of Friday sittings, so I very much welcome the fact that she has had an opportunity to set out her case. Her former colleague, Madeleine Moon, was formidable in our meetings, drawing from her personal experiences to help shape and focus our work as we went forward. This issue has much interest from cross-party MPs not just here in Parliament but in the devolved Assemblies across the UK; health and disability charities and stakeholder groups; public advocates such as Charlotte Hawkins, a patron of the MND Association; and individual campaigners up and down the country, including Mark Hughes, Liam Dwyer and Sandra Smith, who have brought the campaign to Westminster and spoken to the hon. Member for Newport East and me.

I absolutely understand the importance of this issue and the need to make changes, as does the Department. This debate is focused on special rules for terminal illness, or SRTI. For an individual and their friends and family, receiving a terminal diagnosis is devastating. Supporting people in this difficult situation is crucial, and the SRTI ensure that financial support can be provided as quickly as possible, so that the claimant can focus on what time they have remaining.

On the basis of this issue being raised by that extensive list of interested MPs, stakeholders and campaigners, we rightly agreed to do a full and comprehensive review of the support we offer that focused on four strands. The first was hearing directly from claimants and charities about their first-hand experiences. We had claimant engagement, including drop-in sessions and conversations with claimants with cancer and motor neurone disease. We also held extensive stakeholder workshops and meetings with organisations including the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Macmillan, Marie Curie, the Multiple System Atrophy Trust, Sue Ryder, the National Bereavement Alliance, Hospice UK, the National Nurse Consultant Group, the Association of Palliative Care Social Workers, the British Lung Foundation, the Queen's Nursing Institute, the Association for Palliative Medicine, the Royal College of Physicians and the British Geriatrics Society. I wish to thank them for the huge amount of time and resources they dedicated to help ensure that the changes we bring forward are the right ones that work.

Secondly, we looked at international evidence to find out what works in other nations and what support they provide. That included looking at 22 separate countries. Thirdly, we reviewed current DWP performance to better understand how our SRTI rules and severe condition processes operate and perform, including a full audit of the DS1500, in-house staff research and a clinician survey, which more than 1,000 clinicians took the time to complete to give us helpful advice and information. Finally, we had clinical engagement, where we discussed

[Justin Tomlinson]

the SRTI with palliative care experts at end-of-life clinical groups, including Professor Bee Wee, the national clinical director for end of life care. As we promised, this was a comprehensive review.

It was very clear from the findings of those discussions that there is a lack of consistency. A key theme that came up was: why is this not aligned with national palliative care initiatives? That leads to duplication. I spoke to GPs, and they said to me that one of the worst roles they have to perform is explaining to a patient that they will now be entering the terminal illness phase, with the administering of palliative care. That is done at 12 months, and if someone wishes to have a DS1500—which, to be clear, is not the only way to access the SRTI, but it is probably the easiest—the GP has to have that same awful, tough conversation. That is not good for GPs, because it is a duplication—that is an obvious example of something that should be reviewed as part of the Government's commitment to create an additional 50 million GP appointments a year—and it is not good for the claimant or their friends and family who are providing support.

We also discovered from the findings that there is mixed awareness of the support that is available. We recognise that some people are not getting the support because they simply do not know that it exists. As I have previously confirmed on the Floor of the House when asked by other MPs, we agree that there needs to be a change. The status quo is not acceptable, and the three themes will address raising awareness, improving consistency and changing the six-month rule.

I understand the frustration about the delays, and as the Minister I am very sorry that we have not been able to bring in these changes quicker—I dearly wish that I was in a position to have done that—but this is complex, and there are a number of issues. First, as the hon. Lady alluded to, covid has caused issues. We needed clinical evidence and engagement to ensure that we were making the appropriate changes, because the reality is that if we propose something that does not work for the NHS, and for GPs and health professionals, this will simply not work. That is the challenge that the Scottish Government are facing. They announced their changes long before us, and although they still hope to legislate this year, they are far further away from being able to make changes than we are. In effect, they had very laudable hopes to allow anyone with a terminal illness to be able to access this fast-track support. The problem is in relation to people who are terminally ill from the day they are born. The Scottish Government would not accept that a day-old baby should then get access to this, so they now have to apply conditions that limit access for those they were intending to give it to, which means that they are in danger of creating a far more complicated system, which would not be welcomed by health professionals and clinicians, than the current status quo that we all agree should change. I have spoken to the Scottish Government and urged them to look closely at the changes we are proposing. Hopefully we can have a united and consistent approach across the whole UK.

Covid did cause delays in completing the review. It has also caused delays because the reality is that the changes we wish to make are extensive and will require primary legislation. That has to be lined up with the

Department of Health and Social Care, and I have to do that at a time when health professionals and my Front-Bench colleagues are tackling covid.

Jessica Morden: I know that the Minister is sincere about this, but could he give us some idea of a timescale? Will he also meet me and campaigners urgently to explain this in person?

Justin Tomlinson: That is absolutely a fair challenge. I do regularly meet those groups and have kept them engaged throughout the process, as I recognise how much they have invested in ensuring that we made the right proposals for change. Because of the importance and seriousness of the issue, they are understandably desperate for these measures to be brought forward, and that is an aim that my Department and I share. We hope that we are in a position in the coming months to set out the timetable to start bringing forward the changes. We have already done the bits for which we do not have to legislate; we always made it clear during the review that if there were things we did not need to legislate for, we would get on with them.

We discovered that the information on gov.uk was not good enough—we have improved that—and that not all clinicians were up to speed on the DS1500. Again, working with DHSC, we were able, before covid came, to ensure that the advice and guidance given to clinicians was increased. We are working at pace to get that legislation lined up. It is crucial that we do it in a way that works with the NHS and across Government, and that is an absolute commitment.

We are also determined to go further. From talking to stakeholders, it is clear that there are other things we can improve—for example, for those who might not quite be in the terminal illness area, but for whom the current system is not quick and simple enough. In the forthcoming health and disability Green Paper, we will be exploring a number of themes. Again, those groups will be proactively supporting our work to help to change things. First, the ability to access supportive evidence needs to be more consistent. In some cases, it is a postcode lottery. Clear supportive evidence increases the chance of a paper-based review, and a quicker, simpler and more accurate outcome. We want to look at existing evidence on the principle of “tell us once”. That is a cross-Government thing—that, ideally, those awful conversations should only ever have to happen once. That information is then populated across all the support, and that helps the claimant.

I want to look at a broader range of evidence. For example, would I need a GP to tell me that somebody has MND if they are getting support from an MND nurse? Why would the nurse be providing support unless that person had MND? That is a really simplistic example, but there are many examples from the many charities and organisations that provide palliative care. Can we not give greater strength and credence to their supportive evidence?

I also want to look at advocacy. The benefits system is complex at the best of times, and, as the hon. Member for Newport East so articulately said, in those final moments, when every moment is so precious, we do not want to be navigating something that is complicated. We want to look at the role of friends, family and advocates. Again, regarding those examples of the Macmillan nurses,

the Sue Ryder nurses and the MND nurses, how can they be more involved in the application and the securing of that support?

We also need to look at the assessments themselves. During the covid pandemic, we have introduced telephone and video assessments. In the Green Paper, we want to explore this further. The key bit the stakeholders will be interested in is looking at reducing unnecessary assessments. Again, that is part of our commitment to create a quicker and easier route where the evidence is clear. That is building on a principle that we already have with UC and the severe conditions criteria. There are many positive lessons that we can learn from that and extend across the other benefits, and, as I have said, we can look at removing those unnecessary assessments.

On a broader level, through the forthcoming national strategy for disabled people, I want to look at, engage and consult on what more can be done across Government, because it is not just from the Department for Work and Pensions that people in this situation may need support, additional help and guidance. I want to see whether there are other areas where we can talk across Government to improve the situation. I would also like to look at the private sector. For example, Nationwide Building Society

worked with Macmillan to improve its training, understanding and guidance to support cancer patients with its financial products. That is an exemplary example that we can look to build on and share, so that a more sympathetic, understanding and flexible approach becomes a given to people in these situations.

In conclusion, we are absolutely committed to bringing this forward as quickly as we can, and we are working across Government on this. Despite the covid challenges, despite the complexity, I am confident that we are getting close. We will look to improve and raise awareness and we will change the six-month rule. The Secretary of State and I are absolutely committed to that. I am full of admiration for the work that the hon. Lady and all of those supportive groups and campaigners have done on this vital matter. We absolutely agree that this is one of those rare issues that unites all political parties and all areas of devolved Assemblies. We are all agreed on this and we just need to find a way to deliver this complex, but crucial legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

10.32 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 22 February 2021

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Advance Research and Invention Agency

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): The UK has a proud history of scientific excellence and invention. Charles Babbage, Ada Lovelace and, later, Alan Turing pioneered early predecessors of the computer. Thomas Newcomen and James Watt gave us the steam engine, and Michael Faraday gave us the modern battery.

This Government are committed to continuing this tradition and cementing our role as a science superpower. That is why our manifesto committed to creating a new funding agency, focused on high-risk, high-reward research. I am pleased to update the House that we will be fulfilling this commitment through a new Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA), and we will also be introducing a Bill as soon as parliamentary time allows to create this body.

ARIA will have the sole focus to fund ground-breaking research—research that sparks transformational societal change through the creation of new technologies and new industries.

With £800 million committed to ARIA up to 2024-25, ARIA will form a central part of delivering on our R&D road map, published in July 2020, to ensure the UK is the best place for scientists, researchers, and entrepreneurs to live and work, while helping to power up the UK's economic and social recovery.

As we have developed ARIA, we have sought best practice from international partners. Success stories include DARPA in the US, whose predecessor, ARPA, was instrumental in creating transformational technologies like the internet and GPS. More recently, DARPA has been behind precursors to technologies such as Apple's SIRI.

We have also listened to the scientific community about how these models can best be adapted for the UK to enhance our R&D offer. This includes ensuring ARIA complements existing funders and makes a distinct contribution to the wider R&D landscape. To this end, ARIA will have a bespoke purpose and structure, and will work in partnership with UKRI and across the ecosystem.

ARIA's key features will be:

A singular focus on high-risk, high reward research funding. ARIA will provide support for transformational, long-term science and technology. ARIA will not be restricted in whether it funds pure science, applied science, or technological development—in fact, often it will do aspects of each within a single programme.

A high tolerance for risk and failure. Failure is part of the scientific process, and particularly central to finding the technological breakthroughs that have the potential to create the industries and jobs of the future. ARIA will not shy away from high risk, in the pursuit of high rewards.

Minimal bureaucracy. The recent approach to covid-19 rapid response funds and the vaccine taskforce has led to a cultural shift around funding and decision making, towards a more lean and agile system, and ARIA will continue this trend. It will have an innovative approach to funding, with the ability to use mechanisms such as seed grants and prizes to ensure the best support for the best ideas. ARIA's programme managers will be able to pull in scientists on projects within a matter of weeks.

To empower exceptional talent. ARIA will be run by exceptional scientists who have the expertise to identify the most exciting and ground-breaking research to invest in. Government will invest in these exceptional individuals, empowering them to use their expertise to identify what research to back rather than providing a research focus for the organisation, and giving them the freedom to start and stop projects quickly and redirect funding efficiently.

Alongside the Bill, we will recruit a visionary CEO and experienced chair. They will develop ARIA by setting the agenda, shaping the culture, and building an exceptional team for the agency.

ARIA will further diversify our rich and dynamic R&D system, taking us to the next level of scientific and technological advances. Its successes stand to have an impact on how we fund R&D in the future, and ensure we maintain our outstanding global reputation for innovation and discovery.

[HCWS787]

Departmental Contingent Liability Notification (UKAEA Fusion Liabilities)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members to bring to their attention the details of an amendment to the contingent liability for the fusion activities of the UK Atomic Energy Authority, hereon referred to as UKAEA.

UKAEA operate experimental fusion reactors at Culham, Oxfordshire. Under the Nuclear Installations Act 1965, UKAEA is required to meet any third-party liabilities arising from an onsite incident resulting in exposure to ionising radiation.

A remote and unquantified contingent liability is in place which provides cover for such liabilities above £2.25 million. UKAEA's captive insurer previously provided cover for such liabilities up to £2.25 million. This was wound up in 2019 as it did not provide good value for money to the taxpayer. Commercial arrangements to replace the captive insurer and cover nuclear liabilities—either in part or in full—would not provide good value for money. The best value for money for taxpayers would be to amend the existing remote unquantified contingent liability held by BEIS to include all costs arising from exposure to ionising radiation due to the fusion activities of UKAEA.

This contingent liability will remain remote and unquantified. There is no expiry date so it will be reviewed annually to ensure it continues to be good value for money for the taxpayer.

The Government will be subject to a new contingent liability for all liabilities from UKAEA fusion activities that lead to exposure to ionising radiation, and I will be laying a departmental minute today containing a description of the liability undertaken.

[HCWS783]

Postgraduate Student Funding

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members, to bring to their attention the support that the Government are providing to United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) funded doctoral students to address the challenges related to covid-19 restrictions.

When lockdown began last year, UKRI communicated immediately that PhD studentships should not be suspended, ensuring students could continue to receive their stipends. In April 2020, £44 million of urgent funding was announced for up to six-month extensions for PhD students in their final year who could not complete their studies as originally planned due to covid-19 restrictions. This was taken up by 77% of eligible students.

In November 2020, a further £19.1 million was allocated to research organisations hosting UKRI funded students. This enabled those organisations to target additional support to those UKRI funded students who needed it most including those whose study had been impacted by caring responsibilities or health reasons, and those in their final year.

These two phases of funding amount to £63 million of funding and will provide support to approximately 10,000 students.

Since the introduction of the current restrictions in January, the Government have continued to monitor the impact on the research sector. I asked UKRI to explore what else could be done to help and I can now confirm that we will be providing additional support to UKRI funded PhD students.

A further £7 million will now be made available to allocate extensions, based on need, to those students still to complete their studies. Additionally, UKRI are exploring options to increase flexibility for grant holding organisations to allocate existing funding for training and cohort development activity to fund extensions.

Research England will also be delivering around £11 million of block grant funding to English universities as a contribution to their support for their postgraduate research communities, including to students funded by universities themselves and to self-financed students.

By the end of this phase of support funding, UKRI will have provided additional support totalling £70 million, including extensions, to around half of all their funded students who were studying at the start of the first lockdown extension. This support has been targeted at those most in need and with equality, diversity and inclusion considered throughout.

Ensuring that the research sector in the UK has the people and skills it needs is crucial to realising Government's ambition to cement our status as a science superpower. We will continue to monitor this situation closely, to ensure that we are able to consider additional support if necessary.

[HCWS786]

EDUCATION

Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): Last week the Department for Education laid the "Higher education: free speech and academic freedom" Command Paper in Parliament and then published it more widely. This sets out how Government propose to deliver on their 2019 manifesto commitment to strengthen academic freedom and freedom of speech in universities in England.

This Government have always been clear in their commitment to strengthen academic freedom and ensure that our universities are places where free speech can thrive. Without action to counter attempts to discourage or even silence unpopular views, intellectual life on campus for both staff and students may be unfairly narrowed and diminished.

Despite protections which are currently in place, a body of research has shown evidence of a "chilling effect" on students and staff, who report feeling unable freely to express their views within the law without fear of repercussion. This is emphasised by a small number of high-profile incidents in which staff or students have been threatened with negative consequences, sometimes successfully, confirming that the fear of repercussion is not always unfounded. The Government therefore consider it necessary to take action, including by amending legislation.

This Command Paper identifies key limitations of the current framework and proposes a clear way forward, to clarify and strengthen the legislation on freedom of speech and academic freedom, and thereby ensure that the aforementioned "chilling effect" is effectively dealt with. Freedom of speech and academic freedom are fundamental principles of university life, and it is our duty to afford the necessary protections where these are found to be lacking. The Government intend to take action after carefully considering and discussing the options laid out in this paper with stakeholders. We will announce further steps in due course.

I will place copies of the Command Paper in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS784]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Reorganisation

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): As I told the House on 12 October 2020, c. 6-7 WS, I have issued invitations under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (the 2007 Act) to principal councils in Cumbria, North Yorkshire, and Somerset, including associated existing unitary councils, to submit proposals for moving to unitary local government in those areas.

On 9 December, I received eight locally led proposals—four from councils in Cumbria, two from councils in North Yorkshire and two from councils in Somerset. In the case of each area there is a proposal made by the county council for a unitary authority covering the

whole area. In the cases of North Yorkshire and Somerset, there is a proposal from district councils for two unitary authorities in each area. In Cumbria district councils have made three proposals, each of which involves establishing two unitary authorities.

Today I have launched a consultation on all eight proposals. I would welcome views from any interested person, including residents, and I am consulting the councils which made the proposals, other councils affected by the proposals, and councils in neighbouring areas. I am also consulting public service providers, including health providers and the police, local enterprise partnerships, and certain other business, voluntary sector and educational bodies.

The consultation period will run for eight weeks until Monday 19 April. The consultation document is available and those responding may do so on the Department's online platform "Citizen Space" or by email or post. The consultation will provide information to help my assessment of the merits of each proposal, and I will carefully consider all the representations I receive, along with all other relevant information available to me.

The context of this consultation is that the 2007 Act provides that before any proposal is implemented I must consult any council affected by the proposal that did not make it and any other persons I consider appropriate. Once the consultation is concluded, I will decide, subject to parliamentary approval, which, if any, proposals are to be implemented, with or without modification. In taking these decisions I will have regard to all the representations I have received, including those from the consultation, and all other relevant information available to me, and reach a balanced judgement assessing the proposals against the three criteria—whether they are likely to improve local government and service delivery across the area of the proposal, whether they command a good deal of local support as assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal, and whether the area of any new unitary council is a credible geography.

I am also announcing today that I intend as soon as practicable to make and lay before Parliament orders under the Local Government Act 2000 to reschedule the ordinary elections to principal councils in the three areas due to be held on 6 May 2021 for one year to May 2022. The elections for local police and crime commissioners, as well as elections to any town or parish councils, will continue to take place in May 2021.

In deciding to reschedule the 6 May 2021 local elections to principal councils in the three areas, I have carefully considered all the representations I have received including the views expressed by councils. I have also had regard both to the importance of local elections as the foundation of our local democracy and ensuring the accountability of councils to local people, and to the risks of continuing with the May 2021 elections in the areas when consultations are taking place on proposals which could, if implemented,

result in the abolition of those councils. Elections in such circumstances risk confusing voters and would be hard to justify where members could be elected to serve shortened terms.

Accordingly, I have concluded that, irrespective of what my future decisions might be on the restructuring proposals, the right course is to reschedule the May 2021 local elections. If no unitary proposal is implemented in an area, the rescheduled elections will take place in May 2022. If a unitary proposal is implemented the rescheduled elections will be replaced by elections in May 2022 to the new unitary authority or authorities which could be in shadow form or a continuing council taking on the functions of the other councils in the area.

Finally, I would reiterate that the Government will not impose top-down Government solutions. We will continue, as I am now currently doing, to follow a locally led approach where councils can develop proposals which have strong local support. This has been the Government's consistent approach since 2010, when top-down restructuring was stopped through the Local Government Act 2010. When considering reform, those in an area will know what is best—the very essence of localism to which the Government remain committed.

[HCWS785]

TRANSPORT

Department for Transport: Contingencies Fund Advance

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I hereby give notice of the Department for Transport having drawn advances from the Contingencies Fund totalling £4,000,000,000 to enable expenditure on covid-19 support packages to be spent ahead of the passage of the Supply and Appropriation Act. The schemes include:

Emergency recovery measures agreements with the train operating companies; the covid-19 bus services support grant; safeguarding critical ferry freight routes; and supporting regional transport networks such as Transport for London and light rail networks.

Parliamentary approval for additional resource of £4,000,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department for Transport. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £4,000,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The cash advance will be repaid upon receiving Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.

[HCWS782]

Petitions

Monday 22 February 2021

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Safety of pregnant women during the coronavirus outbreak

The petition of Ernest Boateng,

Declares that the wife of Ernest Boateng, Mary Agyiewaa Agyapong, a 28 year-old pregnant nurse, tragically died in April 2020, after becoming infected with covid-19; notes that a corresponding petition online has been signed by over 100,000 people; further declares that, since Mary's death, very little has been done to protect pregnant women from this life-threatening virus, despite studies showing that for those in the later stages of pregnancy, they are more likely to become severely unwell; further that the announcement of a vaccine which is to be rolled out imminently is good news for many people who are vulnerable, but pregnant women will not be given the vaccine; notes that the current guidance continues to list pregnant women as vulnerable and says that if they cannot work from home then they should adhere to strict social distancing; further notes that research by Pregnant Then Screwed in October found that 57% of pregnant women who are working outside of the home do not feel safe, and only half of pregnant women (53%) have had a risk assessment from their employer; further declares that, even then, many employers are ignoring their own risk assessment; further notes that only 1% of pregnant women who cannot work from home have been suspended from work on safety grounds; further that the groups at increased risk of severe covid-19 were recognised including the increased risk for mothers from Black, Asian and minority ethnic heritage; and further declares that Mary should not have been working based on the facts and findings above as she was 35 weeks pregnant when she tested positive for covid-19.

The petitioner therefore requests that the House of Commons urges the Government to protect pregnant women during the ongoing covid-19 pandemic by ensuring they can either work from home or that they have the right to full paid leave.

And the petitioner remains, etc.

—[Presented by Sarah Owen, *Official Report*, 13 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 443.]

[P002643]

Observation from The Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, (Ms Dorries):

Employers' health and safety responsibilities for pregnant workers have not changed and guidance provided by the Health and Safety Executive emphasises the importance of ongoing, open discussions between employers and their workers. Concerns raised to the Health and Safety Executive are investigated and a range of enforcement from guidance and advice through to prosecution can be used.

On 23 December, guidance for pregnant employees, including pregnant healthcare professionals, was published by the Government together with the Health and Safety

Executive, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Royal College of Midwives. The guidance is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-pregnant-employees/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-pregnant-employees>.

The guidance aims to aid discussions between employees, line managers and the occupational health team about the best way to ensure health and safety in the workplace. It sets out recommendations for women less than 28 weeks pregnant, women who are 28 weeks pregnant and beyond, and women with underlying health conditions

The guidance sets out that if a woman is pregnant and has let their employer know in writing of their pregnancy, the employer should carry out a risk assessment to follow the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 or the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000. Pregnant women of any gestation should not be required to continue working if this is not supported by the risk assessment.

The Government and the Health and Safety Executive have provided clear Health and Safety guidance to employers, to minimise risk in the workplace. This includes a requirement to carry out a risk assessment to identify what work activity or situations might cause transmission of the virus and thinking about who could be at risk (e.g. pregnant women).

The current position set out in this guidance is:

If it is not possible for the employer to offer safe work for an expectant mother following a risk assessment, she is entitled to be offered suitable alternative work.

If there is no suitable alternative work or working from home, the employer must suspend the employee on full pay for as long as the risk remains. This is in line with normal requirements under regulation 16(3) of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

If an employee has concerns, they can raise them with their workplace representative or the Health and Safety Executive, whose contact details are in the Safer Workplaces guides: HSE COVID-19 enquiries Telephone: 0300 790 6787 (Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 5pm).

Where there is evidence that an employer has deliberately flouted the law, HSE will consider taking enforcement action.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation updated their advice on 30 December, which now indicates that vaccination in pregnancy should be considered where the risk of exposure to covid-19 is high and cannot be avoided, or where the woman has underlying conditions which puts them at very high risk of serious complications of covid-19.

In these circumstances, it is recommended that clinicians discuss risks and benefits of vaccination with the woman, and they should be made aware of the absence of safety data for the covid-19 vaccine in pregnant women before accepting it.

TREASURY

Support for people excluded from COVID-19 measures

The petition of residents of the constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran,

Declares that there is urgent concern for around three million people who have been completely overlooked by the UK Government's support package for the covid-19 pandemic; further declares that it is alarming that, despite the Chancellor's recent response to changing circumstances, his Winter Economic Plan continues to exclude people who already could not access the Government's financial

support; further that it is an injustice to the millions of workers who have been thrown into hardship that the Government promised that “no one would be left behind”; further that the Government’s commitment that it would not stop trying to find ways to support people and businesses now sounds hollow in the ears of the three million people—the self-employed, freelance workers, the newly employed as of March this year and the limited company directors—who are excluded from any and all support and are now in their eighth month with no financial assistance; and further that there is deep concern that, despite repeated arguments that the gaps in support are addressed, the UK Government has still failed to address this injustice.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to bring forward additional measures to support the three million who have been unfairly excluded from UK Government support.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Patricia Gibson, *Official Report*, 1 December 2020; Vol. 685, c. 268.]

[P002632]

Observations from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

In response to the pandemic, the Government have provided a wide-ranging economic package that is recognised as one of the most generous in the world, taking unprecedented steps to support families, businesses and the most vulnerable. This package includes support for employees through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), and for self-employed people through the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

So far, the CJRS has helped 1.2 million employers across the UK to furlough 9.9 million jobs. The scheme is scheduled to run until the end of April 2021. The Government have received over £18.5 billion of claims so far across the first three SEISS grants. Further details of the fourth SEISS grant, to cover February to April 2021, will be set out in due course.

In designing and delivering these schemes, the Government prioritised delivering support to as many people as possible, as quickly as possible, while guarding against the risk of fraud or abuse. This meant making difficult decisions, and the Government recognise that some of the eligibility criteria and conditions, necessary to ensure that these schemes work for the vast majority, have meant that some people did not qualify.

Bringing these people into the schemes would have required an unacceptable level of risk of fraud and error. But overall, as the National Audit Office has acknowledged, the Government were right to introduce the SEISS and CJRS, which have been successful in helping to protect the livelihoods of millions of people.

Those ineligible for the CJRS or SEISS may still be eligible for other elements of the wider £280 billion support package available. The Government have introduced a range of additional welfare measures to provide further support to those who rely on the welfare system, injecting an additional £7.4 billion, including a £20 per week increase in the 2020-21 Universal Credit standard allowance and the suspension of the Universal Credit Minimum Income Floor for self-employed people on low incomes until the end of April 2021.

The Government have also increased the Local Housing Allowance rates for Universal Credit and Housing Benefit claimants so that they cover the lowest 30th percentile

of local rents. This increase means nearly £1 billion of additional support for private renters claiming Universal Credit or Housing Benefit in 2020-21, and means over 1.5 million households will gain an average of £600, including those in work. The Government have confirmed that Local Housing Allowance rates will be maintained at the same cash level in 2021-22 in order to ensure that claimants continue to benefit from this increase.

In addition, a number of loan schemes are open for businesses seeking liquidity until the end of March 2021, including the Bounce Back Loan Scheme, Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme, and the Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme. These have provided over £68 billion in guaranteed loans, and sit alongside VAT cuts for businesses in hospitality and tourism, business rates holidays for eligible businesses across the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, as well as nurseries, and billions of pounds in tax deferrals, rate reliefs, and other labour market schemes for businesses facing reduced demand.

The Government have also introduced the Local Restrictions Support Grant (LRS) (Closed), giving businesses forced to close due to national or local restrictions up to £3,000 per month. This was worth over £1 billion for the four weeks of national lockdown in November and will benefit over 600,000 business premises. In addition, these businesses will benefit from one-off grants of up to £9,000 as announced on 5 January. Similarly, where local areas are subject to enhanced restrictions on socialising, in particular a ban on indoor household mixing, LAs will receive funding that enables them to make grants to hospitality, leisure, and accommodation businesses worth up to £2,100 per month.

Businesses that are not eligible for the grants for closed businesses may be able to benefit from funding from the Additional Restrictions Grant. The Government recently increased the funding available under this scheme to £1.6 billion across England. It is up to each local authority to determine eligibility for this scheme based on their assessment of local economic need; the Government encourage local authorities to support businesses which have been impacted by covid-19 restrictions, but which are ineligible for the other grant schemes.

Finally, to give the devolved administrations the certainty to plan and deliver their coronavirus response, the Government have guaranteed that they will receive at least £16.8 billion in additional funding this year, on top of the support announced at spring Budget 2020. This means at least £8.6 billion of additional funding for the Scottish Government, £5.2 billion for the Welsh Government, and £3.0 billion for the Northern Ireland Executive.

These policy responses are carefully designed to complement each other, and provide certainty and support to individuals and businesses across the UK. The Government continue to take a flexible approach and keep impacts and policies under review. That is exactly why they have extended the schemes, to support businesses and jobs over the coming months and prepare them for the inclusive recovery we all want to see.

During this difficult time the Treasury will continue to work closely with employers, delivery partners, industry groups and other Government Departments in order to understand and address the long-term effects of covid-19 and the challenges it poses to the wider economy.

Ministerial Correction

Monday 22 February 2021

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (All Tiers) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021

The following is an extract from the debate in the Second Delegated Legislation Committee on Monday 8 February 2021.

Ms Dorries: Fixed penalty notices for those caught attending illegal gatherings, such as house parties, of more than 15 people will double for each successive offence, up to a maximum of £6,400. There is one point on which I will not have to write to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston. He asked, “Why 15? Why is that the number?” This will just take the number of questions to be answered down by one. This is the new fine for attending larger gatherings, where there is a higher risk of spreading the virus, which goes back to my point that we know how and where the virus travels and where it is most transmissible. It was the scientists who decided this: it was seen as the right level, balancing public health risk versus social impact—for example,

the impact on larger households. There continues to be a fine for breaching covid regulations, including by attending a gathering of 15 or fewer.

[Official Report, Second Delegated Legislation Committee, 8 February 2021, c. 21.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health:

An error has been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct response should have been:

Ms Dorries: Fixed penalty notices for those caught attending illegal gatherings, such as house parties, of more than 15 people will double for each successive offence, up to a maximum of £6,400. There is one point on which I will not have to write to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston. He asked, “Why 15? Why is that the number?” This will just take the number of questions to be answered down by one. This is the new fine for attending larger gatherings, where there is a higher risk of spreading the virus, which goes back to my point that we know how and where the virus travels and where it is most transmissible: **it was scientists who advised this. Fifteen** was seen as the right level, balancing public health risk versus social impact—for example, the impact on larger households. There continues to be a fine for breaching covid regulations, including by attending a gathering of 15 or fewer.

ORAL ANSWERS

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

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**not later than
Monday 1 March 2021**

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