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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 6 September 2021

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

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

SEVENTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 700

SIXTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2021-2022

House of Commons

Monday 6 September 2021

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Universities: Physical Teaching

2. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the potential effect of (a) covid-19 quarantine requirements for international students and (b) outbreaks of covid-19 in universities on the safe return to physical teaching in the 2021-22 academic year. [903316]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): We have worked closely with the sector to ensure that international students will be supported and welcomed. Universities UK International has published bespoke self-isolation guidance for universities. The Government's approach to the lifting of restrictions has been guided by data analysis and advice from public health and the scientific community.

Marion Fellows: The University of Stirling has offered international students who arrive from red-list countries free on-campus isolation accommodation that includes meals, polymerase chain reaction tests and airport transfers, saving the students more than £2,000. Given the huge economic benefits that international students bring to

this country, will the Government consider financially supporting universities to replicate the good practice at Stirling?

Gavin Williamson: We work with the university sector throughout the United Kingdom to attract the highest-quality talent from around the globe to study at our universities. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to point out the important economic benefits that international students bring to the whole United Kingdom. We will continue to work closely with the sector to attract students, and with the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care to make sure that their access to the UK is easy and properly supported.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my role as a governor of the Valley Leadership Academy. That school, among others in Rossendale and Darwen, sends lots of pupils to university to take vocational courses and to study for vocational qualifications. With that in mind, I thank the Secretary of State for the funding to rebuild two schools in Rossendale—Whitworth Community High School and All Saints' Roman Catholic High School; will he also fund a new building at the Valley Leadership Academy for all the pupils who want to go on to vocational courses?

Gavin Williamson: I thought that if I gave my right hon. Friend two schools, it might shut him up, but he continues to ask for a third. I would love to make such a large promise for him at the Dispatch Box. I would be more than happy to sit down with him to discuss it and see what can be done. He is absolutely right about the value of technical education and how it delivers so much not only for youngsters themselves but for the economy.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Here we are in September and there is a certain sense of groundhog day, with campus chaos caused by the actions, or inaction, of the Government set to return. In November last year, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies published a report that showed that covid outbreaks on

campus could be reduced through the provision of air-ventilation filters. The Welsh Labour Government have committed funding for such machines but the UK Government have not. According to a poll by Manor Interiors, the greatest concern among students returning to their accommodation is air ventilation, so why have the UK Government not provided funding to make campuses safe?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman seems to have missed quite a significant difference between this year and last year: we have rolled out one of the most successful vaccine programmes anywhere in Europe. We were one of the first countries to offer people not just one vaccine but two and to make sure that the adult population had that available. That is the big difference between this year and last year.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I hope that all our standards of dress meet your expectations, Mr Speaker.

It is good to be back, but in the previous academic year many of us were shocked to see the scenes of international students having to queue at a food bank in London because economic opportunities for them had dried up due to lockdown. What provision has the Secretary of State put in place to support international students should there be similar lockdowns during this academic year?

Gavin Williamson: May I say that you are brilliantly attired today, Mr Speaker, as you always are?

The hon. Lady asks an important question about international students. Such students have always had access to hardship funding, which is available to them as it is to domestic students.

University Campuses: Freedom of Speech

3. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect freedom of speech on university campuses. [903317]

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): We are working to ensure that lawful freedom of speech is supported to the fullest extent, which is why the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill was introduced on 12 May. The Bill will strengthen existing freedom of speech duties and introduce clear consequences for breaches of the new duties.

Marco Longhi: Labour and the Lib Dems have described the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill as a distraction. Does my hon. Friend agree that the politicising of education, the tearing down of statues and the censorship of speakers who do not fit left-wing woke narratives are all completely indefensible, and that the protection of academic freedoms and freedom of speech in education settings should be a priority for us all?

Michelle Donelan: This Government believe that freedom of speech and academic freedom are a fundamental pillar of our higher education system and that protecting those principles should be a priority for our universities and never a distraction. That is why this Government have introduced a Bill to strengthen protections for free speech and academic freedom.

Supporting Young People into High-quality Jobs

4. **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support young people into high-quality jobs. [903318]

13. **Gary Sambrook** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support young people into high-quality jobs. [903328]

17. **Suzanne Webb** (Stourbridge) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support young people into high-quality jobs. [903332]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): We are supporting young people to ensure that they have the skills and the high-quality, secure and fulfilling employment through the plan for jobs package with £500 million of Department for Education funding. This includes the largest ever expansion of traineeships and an increased incentive payment of £3,000 for employers hiring apprentices.

Simon Jupp: Future skills and technical education are at the forefront of skills investment in East Devon following the Prime Minister's visit to launch the lifetime skills guarantee. Exeter College has opened a groundbreaking future skills centre and has also launched a new Institute of Technology Digital and Data Centre. Does the Secretary of State agree that Devon must continue to diversify in education to improve skills and career opportunities to help provide a future for more young people in Devon?

Gavin Williamson: Having had the privilege of visiting Exeter College, I can say that, with its Institute of Technology, it is a brilliant example of how a college can expand its range of careers and opportunities for so many young people and ensure that they do not think that there is only one route, which is to go to university. My hon. Friend is right to highlight how important it is to have a broad range of opportunities, especially in the new and emerging technologies, which will be so vital in driving the economy forward in East Devon and the south-west.

Gary Sambrook: I recently spoke to staff and students on a visit to Construction College Midlands based at King's Norton Business Park, which offers courses on scaffolding, roofing and road maintenance. Does the Minister agree that those skills are vital to our economy and that what he and his Department are doing will help people to gain these new skills and to change jobs mid-career if they want to do so?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend raises a key point about making sure that people can skill up throughout their career and have the opportunity to take different routes. So much of British industry has been crying out for certain types of skills, which they have sometimes had to look abroad for. What is so key is ensuring that we have those skills available not just for young people, but for all people so that we can meet those skills needs in this country.

Suzanne Webb: I am a great believer in the idea that a university education is not always the route to a high-quality job and that T-levels are a fantastic opportunity to provide not only the technical qualifications, but the

industry placements, which are so important. Will my right hon. Friend support me in my drive and mission to encourage businesses in my constituency to come on board and provide those industry placements? It is a win-win situation not just for young adults, but for businesses because they can circumnavigate the recruitment process as they will have those candidates on board and can experience what they can deliver.

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend has identified the real opportunities that exist for businesses in working with young people and colleges and bringing them into their company. T-levels have been designed hand in glove with employers, making sure that they are not only fit for employers, but work for students as well. I join her in encouraging employers to take on placements for T-levels. We are seeing a big expansion this year and expect an even bigger expansion next year.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Scotland has the highest proportion of school leavers going into positive destinations anywhere in the UK. Free tuition in schools, colleges and universities saves Scottish students up to £27,000. Given that fees will be imposed on English students seeking vocational courses, can the Minister detail what assessment has been carried out on the impact of fees for vocational courses in England?

Gavin Williamson: We are working across the sector to ensure that there is an ever-expanded offer of higher technical qualifications. The lifetime skills guarantee has been introduced and has already had excellent take-up, which means that if people have missed a level 3 qualification, they have the opportunity later in life to take one completely free of charge in order to boost their future employment and earnings potential.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for what he is doing on skills and for the Government's excellent holiday activities programme over the summer. The attainment gap between boys and girls is widening, with 62.3% of boys receiving A to C grades at GCSE, but 74% of girls receiving the same results. What is he going to do to ensure that boys are not left behind, including in the jobs market?

Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend and I are very much united in the same mission: to ensure that youngsters from some of the most disadvantaged backgrounds are given every possible advantage to be able to do the very best in their life. There is a concern about the widening gap between boys and girls, which is why all the interventions regarding standards and small group tutoring are about driving up attainment and achievement. Some of the initiatives that we have introduced—such as the summer schools in which half a million students have taken part over the last few weeks and the tutoring programme—have started to have an impact, but I recognise that there is so much more to do. That is why we are absolutely committed to deliver on this.

GCSE and A-level Examinations

5. **Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to help ensure that the structure of GCSE and A-level examinations in summer 2022 is equitable for all students, including those with limited access to online learning. [903319]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Ensuring fairness is at the core of every decision that we have made regarding exams in 2022. Together with Ofqual, we have consulted on adaptations to GCSE and A-level exams in 2022, so that they take account of the disruption to pupils' education. The consultation on the details of those adaptations was launched on 12 July and closed on 1 August. We plan to announce decisions shortly.

Sam Tarry: I wonder whether the Secretary of State and the Minister could aim higher in their grades next year. Last year we saw U-turns, not just on teacher assessments, but on the broken algorithm. Residents and teachers in Ilford South would really like some assurances in the year ahead that instead of dithering and delaying—like almost every other decision over the last 18 months—we will actually get clarity from the Education Secretary and his team, and that they will learn from their mistakes and provide a contingency plan in case exams cannot go ahead as normal in 2022.

Nick Gibb: It is, of course, our intention that exams will go ahead in 2022. They are the fairest method of assessing young people. As I have said, we have already announced the details of adaptations to those exams to ensure that they are fair. We are also working with Ofqual, as the hon. Gentleman would expect, on contingency plans in case it does not prove possible for exams to go ahead safely or fairly, and those plans will be published shortly.¹

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Since the Government took over, the gap between state school and private school attainment has grown to a record degree. It is also growing at record speed. Is this the legacy that the Minister is proud of? If not, what is he going to do about it?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman ought to look at the record of the last Labour Government. The gap was narrowing throughout the years—

Peter Kyle: We're talking about your record.

Nick Gibb: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will tell him our record. Under this Government, the gap between the independent sector and the state sector in terms of top grades for A-levels narrowed from 2009-10 to 2018, from 27 percentage points to 21 percentage points. If we go back further and look at the proportion of three grade As and A*s attained at A-level in independent schools versus the proportion achieving those grades in state schools, the gap widened under the last Labour Government, rising by 13 percentage points between 1994 and 2009. The gap was at its maximum in 2009, at 22.1 percentage points, before steadily declining by 15.8 percentage points by 2018-19.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Given the disparity between the predicted A-level grades awarded by state and private sector schools this year, does the Minister agree that in order to create a level playing field for all students, A-level exams should be marked and grades awarded before they apply to university? Do the Government remain committed to that policy?

1. [Official Report, 14 September 2021, Vol. 700, c. 7MC.]

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We are committed, as a Government, to looking at post-qualification applications to university to address the very real issues that he raises.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Whether in examinations or any other element of the education system, funding is crucial. Haringey borough has lost £690,720 of its pupil premium. When are the Government going to put that right?

Nick Gibb: The pupil premium this academic year will be £2.5 billion, up from £2.4 billion last year. This Government introduced the pupil premium because we are committed to ensuring that a child's background should not reflect their outcomes in their education.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): The Institute for Government has estimated that it will take about three years for the dust around grade inflation to settle. Will my right hon. Friend tell us when the chair of Ofqual will outline a plan to tackle that; and will he please squash the ridiculous rumours about an A** or grade 10 being brought in?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I can assure him that there will be no change to the grading system for 2022 but we are looking at the longer-term issue about grading in GCSEs and A-levels.

BTEC Qualifications

6. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure that students can continue to study for BTEC qualifications in the future. [903321]

23. **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential impact of removing funding for BTEC qualifications on students wishing to undertake vocational qualifications. [903338]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Employers are facing skills shortages that we must act to address. It is vital in a fast-moving and high-tech economy that technical education closes the gap between what people study and the needs of employers. Our plans for reform of level 3 qualifications were published on 14 July. We will continue to fund high-quality qualifications that can be taken alongside—or as alternatives to—T-levels and A-levels where there is a clear need for skills and knowledge that T-levels and A-levels cannot provide. Those may include some Pearson BTECs, provided that they meet new quality criteria for funding approval.

Dame Diana Johnson: The DFE's own impact assessment says that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds will lose most from scrapping BTEC funding, and that does not fit with what the Government talk about in their levelling-up agenda. Wyke Sixth Form College in Hull North, under the excellent leadership of Paul Britton, currently offers vocational BTECs in areas such as engineering, IT, computing, and health and social care—all highly relevant to our economic needs now. Given the growing problem of skills and labour shortages that the

Minister has referred to, is not scrapping BTEC funding, with no tried and tested replacement, both damaging and short-sighted?

Gillian Keegan: We are not scrapping BTEC funding; we are upgrading our level 3 qualification offer to make sure that it keeps in line with the needs of today's economy. T-levels were in design for many years. They were designed with 250 leading employers who said that the qualifications needed to be upgraded to keep up. Poor-quality qualifications benefit nobody, least of all those who are disadvantaged. All our qualifications will be high-quality and we will make sure that they offer clear progression routes into the workforce or into higher education.

Judith Cummins: Where learners over the age of 19 are returning to study, the removal of BTEC funding will mean that only those following an academic pathway will have the option to return to study or to skilled employment. How is removing learners' options to progress to level 3 qualifications and to higher education or employment compatible with the lifetime skills guarantee offer? Can that be right?

Gillian Keegan: To be clear, the level 3 offer will also include T-levels; we are also considering access to those to a broader group. The lifetime skills guarantee is a level 3 offer specifically focused on adults that was introduced in April this year in more than 400 courses, all of which address a skills shortage. We are trying to make sure that when people put their time, and sometimes their own money, into study, it offers value to them and to the workplace. That is what is behind our level 3 qualifications review.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the outstanding work done by Lackham College in Chippenham—the constituency of my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities—with regard to land-based training, agriculture, horses and animal handling, must be recognised in every possible way, and that many of these people deserve a BTEC? Will she also give some further thought to the question of how they fund resits, which at the moment are entirely unfunded?

Gillian Keegan: My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and I went to visit Lackham very recently and were delighted to see its investment in agritech facilities, which are groundbreaking and world class. It will mean that young people in that area will have the opportunity to study the very latest technology and techniques that will be required for our agriculture industry. In addition, there will also be a land management and agriculture T-level, which has been designed with the industry sector to make sure that many people across the country get the opportunity to study at that level with that investment.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Some 230,000 students have just studied BTEC level 3 qualifications. For the Minister to stand there, as she just has, and dismiss those qualifications as poor quality will disgust those students and many of the people who have supported them. The Minister suggests she has widespread support, but 86% of respondents to the Department for Education's own consultation disagreed with the Government's plan

to scrap funding for qualifications that overlapped with T-levels. Even the former Conservative Education Secretary, Lord Baker described it as

“an act of educational vandalism.”

Why are the Government intent on removing the ladder of opportunity from so many students, particularly those from the most deprived communities, when there is such widespread opposition to this move?

Gillian Keegan: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I would definitely not dismiss the BTEC qualification or its quality, and the reason I would not is that I am one of the very few people in this place who has taken a BTEC as part of their apprenticeship. I very much appreciated my BTEC as part of my apprenticeship, as I did my other qualifications.

T-levels are unashamedly rigorous. They are high-quality qualifications, and there is no point giving access to qualifications that are out of date and have not kept up with the requirements of the workforce. The skills gap between what our employers need and what young people study should not be there. This is an employer-led system. I will tell the House what is a tragedy—a tragedy is having young people not able to get on in the workplace because they have spent two or three years studying something that does not offer the value that employers need in this high-tech economy.

Primary and Secondary School Places: North East Bedfordshire

7. **Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent estimate he has made of the number of (a) primary and (b) secondary school places in North East Bedfordshire constituency. [903322]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): As of 1 May, the borough of Bedford had nearly 18,000 state-funded primary school places and more than 14,000 state-funded secondary school places. Central Bedfordshire had more than 23,000 state-funded primary school places and nearly 25,000 state-funded secondary school places.

Richard Fuller: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the continuous funding support for Bedford borough and Central Bedfordshire, but he will be aware, given the emergency funding provided by the Government for Raynsford Academy so that it could convert to a primary starting in September, the issues around Langford village and parents not being able to get into the local school and the desperate need for a two-form entry in Sharnbook, that population growth in North East Bedfordshire, which is five times the average of that of all Members' constituencies, puts continual pressure on school places. Will he and his Department work closely with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that we fully implement our commitment to infrastructure first?

Nick Gibb: Yes, of course. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss these issues in more detail. He will know that since 2010, we have seen an additional 8,300 primary school places in the borough of Bedford and an increase of 5,800 in primary school places in Central Bedfordshire. We have allocated £12.7 million just this coming year to provide new school places needed for 2023. That takes total funding to Central

Bedfordshire for new school places between 2011 and 2023 to £105.3 million, but I will happily meet my hon. Friend to discuss future plans further.

Music Education

8. **Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What plans the Government have to support the future of music education. [903323]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): We have announced plans to work alongside music industry experts to develop a refreshed national plan for music education. This is aimed at shaping the future of music education and follows the publication of the non-statutory “Model Music Curriculum: Key Stages 1, 2 and 3” earlier this year. The curriculum is designed to ensure that children are introduced to a wide repertoire of music, as well as learning to read and write musical notation and being given knowledge about the important moments in the evolution of music in a range of genres and traditions.

Sir Robert Neill: I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to refreshing the national music plan because, as I hope he recognises, music education is central to any civilised society and should not be regarded as an add-on or a nice-to-have. He will share my concern that in the 10-year currency of the previous plan, the number of pupils sitting GCSE music declined by 19%. Organisations such as the Bromley Youth Music Trust in my constituency do a great deal of excellent work outside school time, but will he assure me that the plan's key objective will be to ensure that music education remains firmly mainstreamed within the curriculum and is not simply an add-on at unreasonable cost to parents?

Nick Gibb: I share my hon. Friend's passion for music. It is important that music is part of a broad and balanced education in our schools. That is why it is compulsory at key stages 1, 2 and 3. We introduced the model music curriculum so that children have a good grounding that encourages them to go on to take music at GCSE. Over the past decade or longer, about 5% to 7% of the cohort have taken a music GCSE. I would like to see that figure rise, and that is why we introduced the model music curriculum and are refreshing the national plan for music education.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Does the Minister understand that music should be not just taught as music but used to teach a whole range of other subjects? Let me take him back to the previous Labour Government, when I attended Egerton Park Arts College in my constituency as a governor and saw the Manchester Camerata perform a maths lesson using its orchestra instruments. It was absolutely mind-blowing. Do we not need more of that? Why did he scrap arts college specialist status?

Nick Gibb: I agree that music is an important part of a broad and balanced curriculum. We know there is a link between children who can play a musical instrument and, for instance, mathematics. We see that in schools such as Northampton School for Boys, which is very successful academically and also has more than 20 choirs,

ensembles and orchestras, because it puts music at the very top of its priorities as well as sports. I accept everything that the hon. Member says about the importance of music in the school curriculum.

Gender Disparity in Educational Attainment

9. **Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle gender disparity in educational attainment. [903324]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): The greatest disparity in educational attainment is due to levels of advantage and special educational needs. The Government have therefore focused on raising standards for all pupils but especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Our education policies target extra funding through the £2.5 billion we will put into the pupil premium this year alongside the funding we put into high needs, rather than targeting by gender or ethnicity.

Nick Fletcher: Research produced by the all-party parliamentary group on issues affecting men and boys highlights how boys are reading far less than girls, especially in disadvantaged areas, and consequently have lower literacy skills. Does my hon. Friend agree that that disparity needs to be addressed? Will her Department consider running a campaign to encourage more parents to read with young boys to address the disparity?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the benefits of early reading for a child's later learning. I know how much he has enjoyed reading with his son. In England, we achieved the highest ever score in reading at primary level in the most recent progress in international reading literacy study, with that improvement largely attributable to the increases in the average performance of boys as well as lower performing pupils. He might like to look at the Hungry Little Minds website, which gives advice to parents on supporting early literacy. I am delighted that two thirds of mainstream primary schools have signed up to deliver the Nuffield early language intervention that is supporting our youngest children in reception with their speech, literacy and language development.

Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The education of girls is vital for a fuller society. Media reports, however, detail how educated Afghan women are burning their degrees, wiping their social media accounts and concealing their identities in the hope that the Taliban will not find them and seek retribution for their gaining an education. What discussions has the Department had with the Foreign Secretary to fund schemes in Afghanistan that will enable girls to continue their education?

Mr Speaker: Order. Just for the record, can we try to make supplementaries relevant to the question? I think the Minister is going to answer it.

Vicky Ford: The situation in Afghanistan, especially for girls and women, is extremely worrying; the Prime Minister is due to make a statement immediately after these proceedings. We are working really hard to resettle Afghan families for the children who have arrived in the UK. About half of those who arrived through the

evacuation recently are children, and half of those children are pre-school and primary school-aged children. We are putting an extra £12 million into extra education funding to try to make sure that those children can get into schools, colleges and early years settings as soon as possible.

Lifelong Learning and Skills

10. **Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote lifelong learning and skills development. [903325]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): As set out in the skills for jobs White Paper, we are implementing an ambitious reform programme. We are already offering free level 3 qualifications, skills boot camps and, from 2025, a lifelong loan entitlement that will ensure everyone can upskill to get great jobs in sectors that the economy needs.

Dr Mullan: South Cheshire College in my constituency has put forward ambitious employer-led plans to become an institute of technology, which will help address the employer skills gaps we have locally. That will deliver levelling up for not just Crewe and Nantwich, but the whole region. Can I encourage the Secretary of State to give his full support to its ambitious plans to become an institute of technology?

Gavin Williamson: South Cheshire College, along with many colleges up and down the country, has demonstrated the real value and worth that further education can deliver, working in conjunction with the higher education sector. I am afraid I cannot be drawn into an early awarding announcement, but we recognise the real importance of such colleges and the obvious success that the early, first-wave institutes of technology are already having in the communities they serve.

T-levels

11. **Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the development of T-levels. [903326]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): T-levels are a fantastic new qualification, designed with leading employers to provide students with the best possible introduction to the world of work. We have provided a comprehensive package of support and investment to help trailblazing providers get ready to deliver. For example, we have made a total of £268 million in capital funding available for T-levels starting in 2020, 2021 and 2022, with £50 million-worth of projects having already been approved for providers delivering from this September and another £50 million-worth of projects for providers delivering from 2022. Additional revenue of £500 million per year will fund the extra T-level hours available, once fully rolled out, and we have also invested £23 million in T-level professional development to help teachers and leaders prepare for the delivery of T-levels.

Cherilyn Mackrory: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am proud that Truro and Penwith College in my constituency has been one of the first colleges to embrace the roll-out of the T-level courses. However, despite the successes of the first year, there is a need for greater flexibility—for example, with the 45 days of

work placements in a part of the county where there is currently insufficient industry. Will the Minister agree to meet me and Martin Tucker, the principal of Truro and Penwith, to discuss how we can address that for the future?

Gillian Keegan: We are very grateful to Truro and Penwith College and all the trailblazing colleges that have pioneered T-levels. They launched T-levels in the middle of a global pandemic, and they have done an amazing job in getting the new qualifications launched. We have been implementing flexible models and approaches to make sure that we can deliver the work placements and that they are deliverable across all industries. Through the capacity and delivery fund, we have allocated nearly £165 million to providers to help them establish the infrastructure and resources they need to deliver industry placements. This will be a culture change: our businesses need to work with our education sector as well as the education sector working with businesses. We have also put in place a £1,000 per place incentive. Of course, I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend.

A-level Achievement

12. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle disparities in achievement at A-level between the north and south of England. [903327]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): We are focused on levelling up opportunity for young people. A-level provision will benefit from recent increases in 16 to 19 funding of almost 10% per student in the 2020-21 allocation. Furthermore, our Opportunity North East and opportunity areas programmes are investing in improving outcomes for young people in many parts of the north.

Damien Moore: I thank my right hon. Friend for his response. A number of schools in my constituency are concerned about the increased number of parents electing to home-school their children. Can I ask my right hon. Friend how he intends to encourage those children back into the classroom, and what resources will be available to close the gap at A-level attainment between the north and south?

Nick Gibb: Many parents who educate their children at home do so extremely well, but in some cases children are not provided with a suitable education and we have provided support to help local authorities' engagement with parents who have recently decided to home-educate. We also remain committed to a registration system for children not in school.

GCSE and A-Level Top Grades

14. **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the variation in the proportion of top grades awarded for GCSEs and A-levels between (a) private, (b) free and (c) other state schools in 2021. [903329]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): We saw success this year for young people from all types of school who were aiming for top grades. Every year there

are variations between types of school; as I said earlier, before the pandemic we were closing attainment gaps and we will redouble our efforts through our catch-up plans and broader work to level up.

Gill Furniss: On this Government's watch the attainment gap between the richest and poorest students has rocketed. Since 2019 alone, GCSE students on free school meals have fallen behind their peers by almost a third. This adversely affects pupils in my constituency of Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, who are significantly more likely to receive free school meals. When will the Minister ditch this empty rhetoric and step up to the plate to resolve the fundamental underlying issues?

Nick Gibb: We totally understand the challenges many young people have faced during the pandemic. Up until the pandemic we had closed the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers by 13% in primary school and 9% in secondary school, and the hon. Lady ought to look back at the Labour record we inherited in 2010. We accept, however, the challenges faced by young people during the pandemic, which is why we are committing £3 billion to catch-up funding and introducing a tuition revolution with 100 million hours of small group tuition for young people, because this Government will do everything we can to ensure that children can catch up from any lost education they have suffered during the pandemic.

Ventilation in Universities: Government Funding

15. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What funding the Government have provided to universities for effective ventilation to help safeguard students against covid-19 in the 2021-22 academic year. [903330]

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): Higher education providers should complete suitable and sufficient assessments of the risk of covid-19 and identify measures to manage those risks, including ensuring adequate ventilation based on our comprehensive guidance. As autonomous institutions, it is for providers to put in place their plans based on individual circumstances, including allocating their own budgets.

Christine Jardine: Notwithstanding the Minister's comments, there are still huge gaps in what needs to be done to provide a safe learning environment for students up and down the country. Students, including many from my Edinburgh West constituency, have already had two academic years disrupted and proper ventilation will be vital to preventing a third, so will the Minister make a commitment here and now that if the schools test pilot currently under way proves successful, it will also be rolled out in our universities?

Michelle Donelan: The hon. Member talks of Edinburgh university but I am sure she will understand that education is in fact devolved. She also refers to the CO₂ monitoring devices that are being allocated this term to schools; however, technical limitations mean that CO₂ monitors are likely to be unsuitable for many spaces in universities, particularly those with high ceilings.

Skills that Businesses Need: Equipping Students

16. **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage schools to equip students with the skills that businesses need. [903331]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): As previously mentioned, T-levels are the new gold standard that have been designed in collaboration with leading employers—250 of them—and our further education reform White Paper and Bill that will be coming before this place are focused on trying to put employers at the centre of our system, to make sure the skills people get give them real currency in the labour market and are backed up by significant funding. I have been lucky enough to visit many providers and speak to many students, and these qualifications are game-changing; the offer is unbelievable and I urge all Members to go out and meet their T-level students and encourage colleges in their area to offer them to students.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the Minister for that answer. The Careers & Enterprise Company has excellent potential to connect employers with schools but few businesses, large and small, I speak to in Thirsk and Malton have engaged with it and some have not even heard of it. What more can we do to raise awareness of it to make sure young people leave school with the skills that businesses need?

Gillian Keegan: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Awareness is often one of the challenges of Government and it is why careers are a key pillar of our Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. We are investing over £100 million in financial year 2021-22 to help young people and adults get high-quality careers provision. This includes funding for the Careers & Enterprise Company to roll out its enterprise adviser network, on which there has been excellent feedback with more than 94% reporting that they are happy with it. Schools, colleges and businesses will be working ever more together; over 3,000 business professionals are already working as enterprise advisers, but I urge any businesses that have not yet signed up to get involved. If they want to build their talent pipeline, that is the place to start. I also urge all Members to encourage businesses to get involved.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Literacy and numeracy, digital and life skills are essential for young people to succeed at work, but progress on closing the attainment gap has stalled—indeed, it has gone into reverse—so will the Minister say exactly what steps the Government are taking to ensure that all children reach their full potential?

Gillian Keegan: Obviously it is vital. There has been much disruption during the pandemic. The first thing is to ensure that all children are back in school and able to stay in school and enjoy all their lessons. All of us will have been to schools and seen the joy in children as they go back to where they belong.

In addition, as the Minister for School Standards has made clear, up until the pandemic the attainment gap was closing; it had narrowed by 13% at the age of 11, and by 9% at the age of 16. Of course, the pandemic has had implications. That is why we have put forward a considerable long-term plan to help recovery in our

schools, and every school will be working on that in the next year or two, but we are always focused on the most disadvantaged children and on making sure that we narrow that attainment gap after the terrible record of the last Labour Government.

Kate Green: But today's Institute for Fiscal Studies report shows that two in five children did not even get minimum learning time during covid school closures, half a million left school this summer having received no catch-up support whatsoever, and the Government are funding just 10% of what Sir Kevan Collins says is needed for recovery. Will the Government finally adopt Labour's children's recovery plan? When we say we will invest in the skills young people and employers need, we really mean it.

Gillian Keegan: We set minimum requirements for all schools for what was required in terms of lessons, and of course we provided extra support, with BBC Bitesize, the Oak National Academy, additional devices—all the support we could. Clearly, it took a bit of time, because we were responding to a pandemic. However, it is clear that under the education recovery fund, which will remain under review, we have millions and millions of student tuition hours still to be taken. Many students are signing up for it; many of them will be receiving that additional support right now in classrooms. However, this is not a short-term solution; there will be longer-term answers.

Topical Questions

T1. [903305] **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): I would like to update the House on what my Department is doing to support the successful return to education. We remain committed to reducing disruption to children and young people's education, allowing schools and colleges to deliver face-to-face learning. Schools are maintaining proportionate protective measures such as testing, ventilation and extra hygiene to keep pupils and staff safe. On-site testing will be offered as students return, followed by regular at-home testing. Students aged 16 and 17, as well as younger children aged 12 to 15 in eligible groups, are encouraged to take up the offer of the vaccine.

Andrew Gwynne: Russell Scott Primary School in Denton had an extensive £2.7 million refurbishment a few years back. Unfortunately, the work was done by Carillion just before it went bump. Some £670,000 has been spent patching the structural problems caused by its works, but another £5 million is needed, and even then, Tameside Council is not convinced that the building will be fixed. This is serious, so may I ask the Secretary of State for an urgent meeting to look at how we can help Russell Scott give the children there the very best education in the very best buildings?

Gavin Williamson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of Russell Scott Primary School. I know that my noble Friend Baroness Berridge would be very happy to meet him and other representatives to discuss in detail some of the challenges that the school is facing.

Mr Speaker: I just remind everybody that we need brief and punchy questions. I call Jason McCartney to set a great example.

T3. [903307] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): Sixth-form education will play a pivotal role in building back better after covid. Will the Secretary of State join me, please, in supporting an increase in base rate funding for sixth-form students to at least £4,760 in the forthcoming spending review? Will he also please agree to meet members of the all-party parliamentary group on sixth-form education, which I co-chair?

Gavin Williamson: I would be absolutely delighted to meet my hon. Friend and colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group on sixth-form education. He will no doubt be aware that we have already been putting extra resources into 16-to-19 education. An additional £400 million was awarded in 2019. We recognise that it is important to invest in the quality of estate, which is why we are putting £1.5 billion into upgrading that estate.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Earlier this year, in June, I stood at this Dispatch Box and confronted the Minister about the number of nurseries and childcare providers that were closing because of the Government's inability to fund the early years sector properly. The Minister accused me of scaremongering. Since June, there has been a further loss of 500 childcare providers in the sector, which brings the net loss for this year alone to nearly 3,000. Will the Minister make up for dismissing the concerns of parents, children and carers by providing targeted funding for the early years sector from this Government?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): The Ofsted data from March shows a 4% dip in the number of childcare providers since 31 August, which is a fall largely driven by childminders and carers, not nursery settings. Sufficiency is the key measure and we have not had any reports of sufficiency issues in early years settings since they reopened in June 2020. We put £3.5 billion into our early years entitlements because we care about childcare.

T6. [903310] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to promote the Turing student exchange scheme in Scotland?

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): The Turing scheme has exceeded expectations, with 40,000 placements across 150 locations. Ministers met Scottish journalists and education providers when applications opened. A total of 28 Scottish institutions have successfully applied for over £7.8 million in funding.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Council for At-Risk Academics has called on the UK Government to set up a fellowship scheme for scholars at risk in Afghanistan similar to the PAUSE scheme in France. Will the Secretary of State consider implementing such a scheme?

Gavin Williamson: I think we all recognise the amazing work that academics and teachers did in Afghanistan, doing so much to support education there. We would

certainly look very closely at all options to support people who are most vulnerable as a result of the Taliban regime.

T7. [903311] **James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): We now know from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation that the chance of 12 to 15-year-olds ending up in intensive care with covid is two in a million. Given that statistic, is it still proportionate that millions of children are losing school days this week to be tested for covid?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend will be delighted to know that we will be reviewing the need for children to be doing home testing at the end of September. If there is not a requirement to do that, we will be looking at removing it. It is important that we continue to keep these matters under review. That is why we will be doing so at the end of this month.

T2. [903306] **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Disabled children and those with high needs have suffered disproportionately as a result of missed education and a lack of assessment. There is a huge shortage of educational psychologists, which is delaying the drawing up of education, health and care plans. Can the Minister tell me what steps she is taking to help those children to get the services they need and to catch up?

Vicky Ford: We have increased the high needs budget by a record £2.3 billion, which is over a third over the past three years. We are also making good progress with the special educational needs and disability review, which has inevitably been a bit frustrated by the pandemic and changed the issues we are looking at, but we absolutely want all pupils to have access to the education they deserve. That is why our recovery funding has also been extra tilted towards those in specialist settings.

T9. [903313] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, maths makes an invaluable contribution to our economy and our way of being, whether that is in computing, encryption, artificial intelligence or even the development of the covid vaccine. The London Mathematical Society has been raising awareness of maths through its "Protect Pure Maths" campaign. Will he tell the House what he is doing to encourage more people to study maths at university and to support the Government's science, technology, engineering and maths agenda?

Gavin Williamson: We have seen a real revolution in maths over the last 10 years, with maths being the most popular subject to take at A-level. This has been supported not just by changes in the curriculum, in terms of how people are learning maths, but by the introduction of new specialist maths schools that are making sure that young people have the opportunity to excel in mathematics, which is so vital.

T4. [903308] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): At the University of St Andrews in my constituency, a number of students are unable to start their studies due to difficulties getting visas and visa decisions. Is the Minister for Universities aware of these delays with international students and what conversations are being had with the Home Office accordingly?

Michelle Donelan: I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member. I work very closely with my colleagues in the Home Office to assist them and make this as smooth as possible, as international students are vital to this country, not just economically, but culturally and for our society.

Mr Speaker: I call Bob Blackman.

T10. [903314] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker—I was going to wear my headset especially for you, but I could not find anywhere to plug it in.

My right hon. Friend recently had a meeting to discuss defibrillators in schools, but will he give us an update on where that will happen and how we can make sure that schools are safe for everyone?

Gavin Williamson: It was incredibly moving to speak to Mark King and listen to his tragic experience of losing his son, Oliver—he was joined by Jamie Carragher as well. It really does focus us on the need to do as much as possible to encourage schools to have defibrillators. That is why we will look at changing the regulations, which are underpinned by secondary legislation, to ensure that all schools have defibrillators in the future and hopefully prevent such a tragedy visiting more families.

T5. [903309] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Safeguarding young people in statutory settings such as schools must always be a priority, yet the same children in community settings are being exposed to huge risks, including consuming large volumes of alcohol, and being exposed to drug dealing and sexual exploitation. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the lack of youth provision for our young people and the importance of putting these services in place, like on the Little Knavesmire in York?

Vicky Ford: I absolutely agree that we need to have more for our young people to do, which is why it has been so brilliant over the summer to see our amazing holiday activities and food programme, which has given young people access to opportunities that they never had before and helped to give them confidence, build their wellbeing and close the attainment gap, as well as providing food. I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member to find out more about what is happening in her constituency.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It was great to visit the excellent Ilfracombe Church of England Junior School's holiday activities and food programme, but

this was one of only a handful of these programmes in my rural constituency. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that more students can access them in the future?

Vicky Ford: I thank all those hon. Members who visited their HAF programmes this summer. They had so much fun and I am delighted that participation was so high. It is the first time that we have ever had this type of project for our children. Local authorities are already setting out their plans for this Christmas. Let us make sure that we get to even more kids.

T8. [903312] **Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Over the past decade, there has been a 47% decrease in drama participation and a 36% drop in music participation in schools. A broad curriculum is vital to young people's life chances, yet access often depends on parents' ability to pay for these activities. I heard what the Minister had to say about the music curriculum but unless the Government commit to providing the resources to all schools to provide creative arts education, young people will be let down. What will the Minister do about it? Will he provide that funding?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): We are committed to arts education. The proportion of those who are taking at least one GCSE in an arts subject has remained broadly stable over the past 10 years. We are also committed to very significant funding for arts and music projects, with £620 million over the past three years, including £79 million for the 119 music education hubs and £148 million for the music and dance scheme. We are very committed to the arts and to drama in our schools.¹

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Secretary of State kindly speak to the Secretary of State for the Home Department about getting visas for the 12 at-risk Afghan scholars—some still in hiding, some in Pakistan—who have been awarded sponsored places by high-quality British universities and who need the visas to take them up?

Gavin Williamson: I will most certainly undertake to do that. We have seen the education community in the United Kingdom coming together to support those who want to resettle from Afghanistan to this country; we also want to look at the opportunities for those brilliant, amazing people from Afghanistan and the part that they can play in our education system in the UK.

Afghanistan

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the situation in Afghanistan and our enduring effort to provide sanctuary for those to whom we owe so much.

Since the House last met, our armed forces, diplomats and civil servants have completed the biggest and fastest emergency evacuation in recent history, overcoming every possible challenge in the most harrowing conditions, bringing 15,000 people to safety in the UK and helping 36 other countries to airlift their own nationals. They faced the pressure of a remorseless deadline and witnessed a contemptible terrorist attack at the very gates of the airport, with two British nationals and 13 of our American allies among the dead. But they kept going, and in the space of a fortnight they evacuated our own nationals alongside Afghan friends of this country who guided, translated and served with our soldiers and officials, proving their courage and loyalty beyond doubt, sometimes in the heat of battle.

The whole House will join me in commending the courage and ingenuity of everyone involved in the Kabul airlift, one of the most spectacular operations in our country's post-war military history. This feat exemplified the spirit of all 150,000 British servicemen and women who deployed in Afghanistan over the last two decades, of whom 457 laid down their lives and many others suffered trauma and injury. Thanks to their efforts, no terrorist attack against this country or any of our western allies has been launched from Afghanistan for 20 years. They fulfilled the first duty of the British armed forces: to keep our people safe. They and their families should take pride in everything they did.

Just as they kept us safe, so we shall do right by our veterans. In addition to the extra £3 million that we have invested in mental health support through NHS Op Courage, we are providing another £5 million to assist the military charities that do such magnificent work, with the aim of ensuring that no veteran's request for help will go unanswered. The evacuation, Op Pitting, will now give way to Operation Warm Welcome, with an equal effort to help our Afghan friends to begin their new lives here in the United Kingdom, and recognising the strength of feeling across the House about the plight of individual Afghans.

Years before this episode, we began to fulfil our obligation to those Afghans who had helped us, bringing 1,400 to the UK. Then, in April this year, we expanded our efforts by opening the Afghan relocations and assistance policy. Even before the onset of Operation Pitting, we had brought around 2,000 to the UK between June and August—and our obligation lives on. Let me say to anyone to whom we have made commitments and who is currently in Afghanistan: we are working urgently with our friends in the region to secure safe passage and, as soon as routes are available, we will do everything possible to help you to reach safety.

Over and above this effort, the UK is formally launching a separate resettlement programme, providing a safe and legal route for up to 20,000 Afghans in the region over the coming years, with 5,000 in the first year. We are upholding Britain's finest tradition of welcoming those in need. I emphasise that under this scheme we

will of course work with the United Nations and aid agencies to identify those whom we should help, as we have done in respect of those who fled the war in Syria, but we will also include Afghans who have contributed to civil society or who face a particular risk from the Taliban, for example because of their role in standing up for democracy and human rights or because of their gender, sexuality or religion. All who come to our country through this safe and legal route will receive not a five-year visa, but indefinite leave to remain.

Our support will include free English courses for adults, and 300 university scholarships. We will shortly be writing to local authorities and the devolved Administrations with details of funding for extra school places and long-term accommodation across the UK. I am grateful for everything that they are doing, and, of course, for the work of the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who is the Minister for Afghan resettlement. I am delighted—but not surprised—that across our country, people have been fundraising for our Afghan friends, and we have received numerous offers of help from charities and ordinary families alike. Anyone who wishes to join that effort can do so through gov.uk.

Our first duty is the security of the United Kingdom, and if the new regime in Kabul wants international recognition and access to the billions of dollars currently frozen in overseas accounts, we and our friends will hold them to their agreement to prevent Afghanistan from ever again becoming an incubator for terrorism. We will insist on safe passage for anyone who wishes to leave, and respect for the rights of women and girls. Our aim is to rally the strongest international consensus behind those principles, so that as far as possible the world speaks to the Taliban with one voice. To that end, I called an emergency meeting of the G7 leaders which made these aims the basis of our common approach, and the UK helped to secure a UN Resolution, passed by the Security Council last week, making the same demands. Later this month, at the UN General Assembly in New York, I will work with UN Secretary-General Guterres and other leaders to widen that consensus still further. We will judge the Taliban by their actions, not their words, and will use every economic, political and diplomatic lever to protect our own countries from harm and to help the Afghan people. We have already doubled the UK's humanitarian and development assistance to £286 million this year, including funds to help people in the region.

On Saturday, we shall mark the 20th anniversary of the reason why we went into Afghanistan in the first place: the terrorist attacks on the United States which claimed 2,977 lives, including those of 67 Britons. If anyone is still tempted to say that we have achieved nothing in that country in 20 years, tell them that our armed forces and those of our allies enabled 3.6 million girls to go to school; tell them that this country and the western world were protected from al-Qaeda in Afghanistan throughout that period; and tell them that we have just mounted the biggest humanitarian airlift in recent history. Eight times, the Royal Air Force rescued more than 400 people on board a single plane—the most who have ever travelled on an RAF aircraft in its 103-year history—helping thousands of people in fear for their lives,

[The Prime Minister]

helping thousands to whom this country owes so much, and thereby revealing the fundamental values of the United Kingdom.

There are very few countries that have the military capability to do what we have just done, and fewer still who would have felt the moral imperative to act in the same way. We can be proud of our armed forces for everything they have achieved, and for the legacy they leave behind. What they did was in the best traditions of this country. I commend this statement to the House.

3.39 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of his statement.

The heroes on the ground in Operation Pitting are the best of us: the ambassador stayed to process every case that he could, paratroopers lifted people from the crush, Afghan soldiers continued to serve alongside us to the end, and thousands of others risked their lives to help others to escape. They faced deadly violence and deliberately-engineered chaos with courage, calm and determination. Thanks to their remarkable efforts, thousands were evacuated, British nationals have returned safely to their families and Afghan friends are starting a new life here in Britain. Speaking directly to those who served in Operation Pitting, I say thank you: your service deserves recognition and honour and I hope that the Prime Minister will accept Labour's proposal to scrap the 30-day continuous service rule so that medals can be awarded for your bravery.

The entire Army, our armed forces and veterans deserve proper support for mental health. The new funding announced today is welcome, but it is unlikely to be enough. Previous funding was described as "scandalous" by the Select Committee, and the Office for Veterans' Affairs is still being cut. All those involved deserved political leadership equal to their service, but they were let down. They were let down on strategy. The Prime Minister underestimated the strength of the Taliban. Despite intelligence warnings that "rapid Taliban advances" could lead to the collapse of the Afghan security forces, a return to power of the Taliban and our embassy shutting down amid reduced security, the Government continued to act on the assumption that there was no path to military victory for the Taliban. Complacent and wrong.

Those involved were also let down by a lack of planning. Eighteen months passed between the Doha agreement and the fall of Kabul, yet as the Prime Minister now concedes, only 2,000 of the 8,000 people eligible for the Afghan relocations and assistance policy—ARAP—scheme have been brought to Britain. A strategic review was published to much fanfare, but it did not mention the Taliban, NATO withdrawal or the Doha agreement. And the Prime Minister convened a G7 meeting on Afghanistan only after Kabul was lost.

Because of this lack of leadership, the Government have left behind many to whom we owe so much. In the last few weeks, MPs have had thousands of desperate calls from people trying to get to safety. Many remain in danger, including the Afghan guards who protected the British embassy. In my constituency—I am not alone; Members across the House will have had this—cases

involve Afghans who applied for the ARAP scheme weeks and sometimes months ago and who were clearly eligible but were not processed quickly enough by this Government and did not make it to the planes. The stress levels for them and their families, and for all our teams and caseworkers, has been palpable in the last few weeks and months. A familiar and desperate story to many on both sides of the House.

The Government do not even know how many UK nationals and Afghans eligible under the ARAP scheme have been left behind to the cruelty of the Taliban. A national disgrace. Even if they could identify who they had left behind, the Government do not have a plan to get everybody out. Kabul airport remains closed to international flights, safe passage has not been created to Afghanistan's neighbours and, whatever the Prime Minister says today, there is no international agreement on the resettlement of Afghan refugees. We have a Prime Minister incapable of international leadership, just when we need it most. [Interruption.] I know that that is uncomfortable. The terrible attacks from ISIS-K highlight the new security threat, and the Government must act quickly to co-ordinate international partners to ensure that the Afghan Government's collapse does not lead to a vacuum for terrorists to fill. There is also a desperate need for humanitarian support. A return to 2019 levels of aid spending is necessary, and where is the plan to ensure that it does not fall into the wrong hands?

To those who have managed to escape Afghanistan and have arrived here in the UK, we say welcome: I know that you will give much to this country as you make it your new home. All you need is help and support. I am pleased that indefinite leave to remain will now be granted to all those who arrive by safe and legal routes. Local authorities across the country are trying to play their part, but they have been in the dark as to how many people they will be asked to support and what resources they will have to do so. We will look at the letter to which the Prime Minister referred and examine the details.

History will tell the tale of Operation Pitting as one of immense bravery. We are proud of all those who contributed. Their story is made even more remarkable by the fact that, while they were saving lives, our political leadership was missing in action.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman did not put many questions to me. He made the general assertion that the Government had not been focusing on Afghanistan but, as far as I can remember, he did not even bother to turn up to the first of my three statements on Afghanistan in the House this year—I do not know where he was—such was his instinct and such was his understanding of the importance of the issue.

Actually, the right hon. and learned Gentleman's figures are quite wrong. Before April we helped 1,400 people to safety from Afghanistan and, under the ARAP scheme, between then and 14 August we helped a further 2,000. As he knows very well, between 14 and 28 August this country performed an absolutely astonishing feat, and of course we will do everything we can to help those who wish to have safe passage out of Afghanistan. That is why we will continue, with our international friends

and partners, to apply whatever pressure we can on the Taliban, economic and diplomatic, to ensure they comply, as they have said they will.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman should, in all candour, acknowledge the immensity of the achievement of this country's armed forces in, for months, planning and preparing for Operation Pitting and then, contrary to what he just said, extracting almost double the number they originally prepared to extract. It was a quite astonishing military and logistical feat.

One thing I welcome is the right hon. and learned Gentleman's congratulations to the armed forces for what they did.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Veterans and families, and indeed the wider public, are asking what it was all for. Afghanistan is back in the hands of a dictatorship, terrorism is once again allowed to thrive, the people of Afghanistan now face humanitarian disaster and, more worryingly, the limits of UK and western influence have been exposed. With America now adopting a more isolationist foreign policy, we have passed the high water mark of western liberalism that began after the second world war. This is a dangerous geopolitical turning point.

Does the Prime Minister agree there is now a void of leadership in the west and NATO? If Britain wants to fill that void, as we should, it will require a complete overhaul of Whitehall to upgrade our strategic thinking, our foreign policy output and our ability to lead.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend deserves to be listened to with great respect on Afghanistan. From his service, he understands these issues deeply, but I must tell him that people listening to this debate across the country could be forgiven for not recognising that this country ceased military operations in Afghanistan in 2014. What we are doing now is making sure that we work with our friends and partners around the world to prevent Afghanistan from relapsing into a breeding ground for terror, to make sure that we use all the levers that we can to ensure that the rights of women and girls are respected, and to make sure that everybody who wants safe passage out of Afghanistan is allowed it. That is what we are going to do, and we will continue to show leadership in the G7, the P5, NATO and all the other forums in which this country leads the west.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I thank all those who assisted in the evacuation from Afghanistan over the past few weeks? May I also thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of his statement? Normally we have a Cabinet Minister sent to the House to cover for the Prime Minister, but today we have before us the Prime Minister desperately trying to cover for a Foreign Secretary who should have been sacked weeks ago. In Committee last week, the Foreign Secretary failed to answer even basic questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). I genuinely hope that the Prime Minister is better prepared today.

There is barely an MP in this House who has not submitted urgent and sensitive information to the Foreign Office on UK and Afghan nationals desperate to find safe passage away from the Taliban. It is a disgrace that most of these urgent queries have been left unresolved and unanswered. It is a disgrace not for us, but for all

those who have been left behind—UK and Afghan nationals who are now fearful and, in many cases, in hiding. Thousands of desperate people—people we have a debt of responsibility to—have been left with no clarity, no answers and no help. So let me ask the Prime Minister: what assessment has been made of the number of UK nationals left in Afghanistan, and what plans are there to assist them? How many Afghans who qualify under the ARAP scheme as interpreters or in other groups have been left behind? Will the Prime Minister apologise to those who have been left behind, left high and dry—those the UK has a responsibility to?

Last night, in correspondence from Lord Ahmad, the Government gave the excuse that delays in evacuating all those with rights were because the Foreign Office had received more correspondence than during covid. But there is a fundamental difference: no one knew that covid was coming. The Government had 18 months to prepare an exit strategy in Afghanistan. So can the Prime Minister give a firm deadline for when the massive backlog of applications will be processed and provide a new target date for when safe passage will be offered to those UK and Afghan citizens?

When Parliament was recalled, the Prime Minister publicly agreed to hold a four-nations summit on the UK's responsibility to welcome refugees here. May I ask him to give us the date when that summit will take place? Finally, with all the talk of a Cabinet reshuffle, can the Prime Minister guarantee that the Foreign Secretary will finally be sacked in any reshuffle—or does he intend to reward incompetence?

The Prime Minister: I am always happy to meet representatives of the Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations, of course.

The right hon. Gentleman asked some specific questions about the handling of requests from those still in Afghanistan and those who have been interceding on their behalf. I can tell him that by close of play today every single one of the emails from colleagues around this House will be answered—thousands and thousands have already been done. As for the question of how many ARAP candidates are remaining, I can tell him that the total number is 311, of whom 192 responded to the calls that were put out. I repeat that we will do absolutely everything we can to ensure that those people get the safe passage that they deserve, using the levers that I have described. But the contrast should be readily apparent to everybody in this country with the huge number—15,000 people—we were able to help just in the course of those few days in August. I think people will understand that it was a very considerable effort by our armed forces.

Mr Speaker: Just to help the House, let me say that we will be running this until around 4.45 pm. Not everybody is going to get in and people will be disappointed, but we are going to do our best, so let us help each other.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I join my right hon. Friend in commending all those involved with the Afghanistan airlift and all those of our armed forces who served in Afghanistan, 457 of whom, sadly, as we know, paid the ultimate sacrifice. We should all be proud of their achievements. Does he agree that as a

[Mrs Theresa May]

result of NATO forces withdrawing from Afghanistan, the terrorist threat has increased? Will he confirm that all those involved in counter-terrorism work here in the UK will be given the necessary support to ensure that they can keep us safe?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. I know how much work she has done in her career to protect this country and to counter terrorism. As yet, we have no direct information on any increase in the threat, but I assure my right hon. Friend and the House that every effort will be made to make sure that our counter-terrorist agents have the resources they need to keep us safe.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I have received hundreds of emails about Afghanistan from constituents, and I have British national constituents—a husband and his pregnant wife—in Afghanistan. What discussions have the Government had with Afghanistan's neighbours about keeping borders open for those at risk under the Taliban and supporting refugees?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that many colleagues in the House will ask similar questions. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has been talking to the Government in Pakistan and other regional countries about what we can do to assist them, as I have described. As the hon. Lady knows, in addition to the ARAP programme we have the Afghan settlement programme, which will run up to 20,000 over the next few years.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): First, I pay tribute to the Prime Minister for his increased funding for mental health care for veterans. I am sure he will keep that sum under review, in case it should need to rise.

Will the Prime Minister draw on the lesson that he has already learned from the appointment of the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), as a single point of contact in the UK, and seek to have a single point of contact for those in Afghanistan who may need to access either the route to exit or support from Her Majesty's Government?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend knows whereof he speaks. I have met people who have come from Afghanistan only recently who have helped us greatly in the past 20 years. As the House will understand, the key issues for them are where they are going to send their children to school and whether they can access the housing they need. I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government for what he is doing. My hon. Friend is quite right that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle, is the single point of contact on which people should focus.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): We all saw the horrific carnage outside Kabul airport, where more than 180 people were killed. I join the Prime Minister in remembering all those victims, not least the two British nationals and the child of a British national. That

airport atrocity was the work of the terrorist organisation ISIS-K. Everyone agrees that we must now work to prevent ISIS-K from becoming a threat to the British people, yet under this Prime Minister's watch he has not only failed to agree a co-ordinated international strategy to take on ISIS-K but failed even to proscribe ISIS-K as a terrorist organisation, unlike other Five Eyes countries. Will the Prime Minister explain these failures on national security?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid the right hon. Gentleman is in error. ISIS-K—ISIS Khorasan Province—is a subset of Daesh. It is part of Daesh. As he knows very well, one of the bitter ironies of the situation is that the Taliban themselves are no friends to ISIS-K, and whatever Government there is in Kabul will need help to fight them.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): We are proving our immense generosity by supporting those in dire need in Afghanistan with safe passage to the UK, but our ability to do so is strained by the continuing uncontrolled illegal migration across the English channel. What more can the Government do to prevent it?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is completely right. The issue is that, very sadly, our friends across the channel in France are faced with a very difficult problem: large numbers of people who want to come to this country. We are doing everything we can to encourage the French to do the necessary and impede their passage. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is working round the clock to ensure that we not only encourage the French to stiffen their sinews and stop people making the journey but use every possible tactic available to us.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): May I raise a constituency matter with the Prime Minister? More than 800 local Afghani families have contacted me about their concerns over their relatives in Afghanistan. The thousands who are coming to this country are largely coming in through Heathrow and being quarantined in about seven hotels in my constituency. There is real anxiety, given the performance in the past on asylum seekers in hotels in my constituency, that those people could be trapped in those hotels for quite a long time to come. I would like the Prime Minister to arrange a meeting with myself and the relevant Minister or officials to discuss the plan to support those families—like everybody else, I welcome them, as do those in my community—but also the long-term relocation plan to make sure that they have all that they need to settle here for the future.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the issue. Some councils have responded magnificently, notably in the east midlands and elsewhere. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is putting substantial funding in place, but if the right hon. Gentleman wants a further meeting, I have no doubt that the relevant Minister will be only too happy to oblige.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I am working with incredible Stroud constituents who are dedicating their time to helping Afghan families under threat. These people are in hiding. The Taliban have been going door to door looking for them. Border options are dangerous

and constantly changing. They are absolutely terrified. Will the Prime Minister help me to show those families that they should not lose hope and help us as MPs to provide timely and credible information about safe passage options?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course. My hon. Friend is entirely right in what she says. That is why we are going to continue to put all the pressure that we can on the Taliban to ensure safe passage for the groups that I have described. We are joined in that by friends and partners around the world.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): May I join the tributes to our armed forces who have worked so hard?

There are still people being persecuted and hunted by the Taliban because they worked for the UK Government, but through contractors, not as direct employees. They have not had replies to their ARAP applications and the rumour circulating is that they may have to wait for the resettlement scheme, but also that many of the places on the resettlement scheme have already been allocated and that the scheme is almost full. Can the Prime Minister clarify the situation for those people, tell us whether some of the resettlement scheme places have been pre-allocated and if so how many, and say what will be done for those contractors as well as direct employees, to whom we owe an obligation?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady raises an important question. I can tell her that the ARAP places have not been transferred and that they continue to be valid—people on the ARAP scheme continue to be eligible. Nor is it correct to say that the initial budget of 5,000 for the resettlement scheme has already been filled. That is not correct either.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Council for At-Risk Academics has been rescuing scholars in danger from oppressive regimes since the Nazi period in 1933. The Home Office has been sent a list of 12 such scholars, some of whom are in hiding in Afghanistan and some in hiding in Pakistan for lack of documentation. Will the Home Office make their case a priority because in them lies any hope for the future of Afghanistan?

The Prime Minister: Yes, there are many difficult cases, but I thank my right hon. Friend for drawing attention to those particular individuals who are at risk. I will ensure that the relevant Foreign Office Minister is in touch with him about the specific cases that he raises.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We know that the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the region is growing by the hour. A famine is expected and of course it will be difficult to get aid through. So what specific steps has the Prime Minister taken already to ensure that the famine is averted, but also that the region receives the international development aid that it requires to avert a further crisis?

The Prime Minister: Immediately that the crisis broke, I spoke to UN Secretary-General António Guterres about what the UN should be doing and what the UK was going to do to support. As the hon. Member knows, the UN continues to be in-country in Afghanistan

and we have doubled our humanitarian support. We will be working with friends and partners at the UN General Assembly and beyond to ensure that we tackle the humanitarian crisis as well.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Certainly the last months have seen the shattering of many illusions. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if we are tonight to help the people of Afghanistan, millions of whom are out in the open and will not be fed, we need to ensure that the whole international community focuses on doing so through the mechanism of the United Nations and probably through the traditional mechanism of a regional contact group, and that Britain—through its experience on these matters, its membership of the UN Security Council and its G7 chairmanship—is now in a pivotal position to help the people I mentioned?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is completely right to raise the contact group in addition to the other forums that I have described, and to pay particular note of the role of the UN; my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has just talked to Jean Arnault, the UN Secretary-General's special representative to Afghanistan. The contact group is a vital part of the way in which we should co-ordinate our efforts.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Some 80% of the world's heroin and opium supply originates in Afghanistan, providing the Taliban with more than half their income and causing untold misery across the world. What steps is the Prime Minister taking in partnership with UK allies to prevent the Taliban and the organised criminal gangs with which they work from flooding our communities with yet more heroin, given that they are now in control in Afghanistan and have fewer impediments than ever to growing more opium?

The Prime Minister: Sadly, the rate of production and export of opium from Afghanistan has been increasing in recent years. I think that the global output is actually now even higher than the figure the hon. Lady suggests. What is needed, of course, is to insist that the Taliban stop this and do not allow Afghanistan to continue to be a narco-state, but the way to fight heroin consumption in this country is to have a strong crime-fighting institution such as the National Crime Agency, and I was privileged to see the United Kingdom's crime fighters doing fantastic work near Glasgow.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware that, as a result of the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, there is great concern that the terrorist threat to this country has increased. Can he reassure the people of this country that we maintain not only the military capability, but the political will, to take whatever action is necessary against groups such as ISIS-K in order to keep this country safe?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. It is a question that a lot of people will have formed in their minds and which my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary has answered before; of course we keep those options on the table and of course the Taliban are aware of that.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): There are many barriers facing people who are already in the immigration system. One is that some, including constituents of mine, have spouses and children whose original documents are with the Home Office and they only have photocopies. Another, of course, is the English language test. Are the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary proposing any movement on those issues in order to support people, particularly those already in the system, to get here as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady should know that, of course, we try to help people coming from Afghanistan in the most expeditious way possible. This country cannot be faulted for the generosity of our offer on the resettlement programme and it certainly cannot be faulted for the sheer number of people we have already moved to this country.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. Aside from the G7 and traditional partners to which the Prime Minister referred, what role does he envisage Pakistan, Uzbekistan and in particular China playing in the geopolitics of the region of central Asia in the months and years ahead?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend asks a very important question. I think the answer is that it is in the interests of every single one of the countries that he has mentioned to ensure that Afghanistan does not relapse into being a breeding ground for terror. That is not in China's interests, in Uzbekistan's interests or in Russia's interests. Russia has abundant experience of the risks of Afghanistan. That is why it is so important that we work with friends and partners around the world—and, indeed, those who are not ordinarily classified as our friends—to achieve a common perspective on the pressure that we have got to apply to the Taliban.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Many of my constituents have family members in Afghanistan who could be eligible for asylum in the UK under more than one route—for example, by ARAP, under the Foreign Office special cases criteria, or under family reunion. Yet there is currently no co-ordination between Departments. My constituents are being passed from pillar to post. ARAP is refusing cases where there may be an alternative route, and the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary are not replying to their emails. When will the Prime Minister sort out this lack of co-ordination across his Government?

The Prime Minister: I must reject that in the strongest possible terms. The House has paid tribute, quite rightly, to the work of the armed services over the last few weeks and months, but it should also pay tribute to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's rapid reaction team who went to Afghanistan, and to the Border Force officials who went out there, who worked hand in glove to help thousands of people come to this country in safety.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): In terms of protecting our country now that the risk from terrorists has undoubtedly increased, what is the Prime Minister's assessment not just of the Taliban's willingness to deal

with terrorists operating in Afghanistan, but of their capability to deal with that terrorist threat, given what we saw from ISIS-K just a week or so ago?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the risks that the Taliban are themselves running, because they now possess the government of Afghanistan and it is their responsibility. They clearly face that threat from IS-K and indeed potentially other groups. Of course they will do everything, I imagine, to protect the public, but in the end we have to face the reality that the Taliban have now got the problem. We will do everything we can, of course, to ensure that we guard against future outbreaks of terrorism from that country, but it is in the interests of the new Government of Afghanistan to crack down on terrorism as much as anybody else.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Under the Nationality and Borders Bill, an Afghan woman who flees with her children and arrives in Britain by an irregular route will not be welcomed; she will be criminalised. Wales has declared our role in the world to be as a nation of sanctuary. Will the Prime Minister withdraw the Bill to enable us to fulfil our ambition and to make that warm welcome he spoke about?

The Prime Minister: No, I cannot accept what the right hon. Lady has said, because this country has been extremely generous—more generous than most countries around the world—not just in bringing people immediately from Afghanistan but in setting out a safe and legal route for 20,000 more to come. That is a big number and the route for those people is clear.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I am very pleased to hear about Operation Warm Welcome. Wiltshire, my county, is home to many thousands of British soldiers who have served with Afghan colleagues over the past 20 years. I hope the Prime Minister will join me in congratulating Wiltshire Council and the communities of Wiltshire, including the military communities, for the welcome that they are offering to the refugees. Will he assure the House that councils across the country will get the resources they need to support those evacuees?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend. Of course I congratulate Wiltshire Council on what it is doing, as I congratulate all councils that are stepping up to the plate and helping Afghans to settle and to integrate at this time. I can tell him that Wiltshire Council and all other councils involved will get the support and funding they need.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Like other Members, my constituency office and I have been doing everything we can to help constituents trapped in Afghanistan and to help their relatives who need to get out urgently, but it is clear that the Government are failing to do all they can to help these vulnerable people and are disgracefully putting even more people's lives at risk. More widely, President Biden has called for an end to

“an era of major military operations to remake other countries”. Given the huge loss of life in the disastrous and tragic wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and elsewhere, is it not time that we do the same?

The Prime Minister: As I have just reminded the House, the UK ended its military operation in Afghanistan in 2014.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): Can I ask the Prime Minister what engagement he and the Foreign Secretary have had with non-governmental organisations, which are the only western organisations that are still on the ground in Afghanistan, and what steps he will take to protect them? Can I also ask what parameters need to be met to see the embassy reopened? The British diplomatic network is one of the finest in the world—that is surely the way to be able to help those who have been left behind.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is entirely right to draw attention to the incredible work done by aid agencies and by NGOs. It is precisely to support those fantastic agencies that we have doubled our humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and the region to £286 million this year.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Later today, I will be reunited with an Afghan special forces commander whom I had the privilege of serving alongside. He is mightily relieved to be here, but understandably deeply concerned about the hundreds of his men and their family members who, although approved for relocation to the UK, were left behind. What can I tell him is being done to ensure that those who are in limbo are afforded safe passage, protection and unimpeded access to the UK?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to the service of the hon. Gentleman and, in addition, to the service of the Afghan special forces. He is absolutely right to draw attention to what they did. I believe that the 333—the Triples—were incredibly important. We will do whatever we can, as I have said, to ensure that those who have not yet come out do get the safe passage they need.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): The Prime Minister just said from the Dispatch Box that no veterans' call for help will go unanswered, and I totally support that ambition. In fact, that was a central aim with the establishment of the Office for Veterans' Affairs when he started it, but he and I know that he has consistently failed to take the measures required to make that a reality for veterans in communities like mine. What is he going to do differently to make veterans feel this has changed, rather than just reading about it in the newspapers or hearing about it from Westminster?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he did as Minister for veterans' affairs and for his service in Afghanistan. I believe that he gravely underestimates what this country has done. Just today, on veterans' mental health, the House will have heard the further support we are offering. This is a Government who are absolutely determined to support our veterans, and that is why we passed the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act 2021 and will continue to take steps to protect the veterans of this country.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I have cases involving more than 300 people who are still stranded in Afghanistan, and despite raising every case with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Home Office, I have yet to receive a

substantial response—not one. My constituents are desperate for information on how to travel to third countries and when the full resettlement scheme will be launched. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss these urgent cases, and promise that every email will receive a proper response from the relevant Department?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady. I expect that she speaks for many colleagues around the House who, like me, will have received messages from those who wish to leave Afghanistan. I repeat what I said earlier: every single email from colleagues is being responded to by close of play today.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Like many Members, I have had emails from Afghans in this country worried about their people back in Afghanistan. The Home Office and the Foreign Office have managed to get some of those people relocated, but I had the extraordinary situation where I had a very detailed email about Afghans who were being persecuted and who had worked for the British. It was very detailed and they produced all the documentation. The following day, my constituent wrote to me and said, "I am really sorry. It is a complete lie. These people are Taliban, and I cannot go through with this masquerade." I just wonder whether we should be on guard against getting such people into this country.

The Prime Minister: I am sure that my hon. Friend, like many in the House, will be relieved to know that from the very beginning of Operation Pitting, the ARAP scheme and all the subsequent schemes we have put in place, the very highest possible security checks have been instituted to make sure that people are who they say they are and that we receive to this country the people who genuinely deserve to come here.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Will the Prime Minister clarify the situation that applies to Afghans who were in our asylum system in this country prior to the fall of Kabul? Will they too be given indefinite leave to remain? Surely there are no circumstances in which they will be forced to return of Afghanistan.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Member, who raises an important point. Many of those individuals will already be going through procedures in the courts, and we cannot interrupt them, so they will go on.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The whole House agreed with the Prime Minister when he celebrated the heroism of our troops, but that simply served to crystallise that this was not so much a defeat as a capitulation: an abandonment by the west of both people and principle. Does the Prime Minister believe that Tony Blair was right this morning when he said that western leadership was "naive" to believe that countries could be remade, or was it that our remaking of Afghanistan needed to last longer?

The Prime Minister: If Tony Blair was saying that it was naive to believe that countries could be remade and he was thinking of some of the things that he supported, I think he was spot on.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Prime Minister will know that after the calamitous collapse of the Government in Kabul and the disorderly retreat by western powers, there was rejoicing in parts of Mozambique, across the Sahel and, of course, in Somalia. Those are countries in which we have an interest because, if nothing else, they can be a source of terrorism here. What messages is he prepared to give about the UK working with partners to guarantee a proper, measured response that ensures we are not at risk of terrorism?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is focusing on exactly the right question and the right response from the western world and, indeed, the global community. We need to work together to ensure that, as far as we possibly can, we condition the new Government and new authorities in Kabul to understand that Afghanistan cannot slide back into being a cesspit of terror. That is our effort today.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Many lessons will have been learned and relearned from Afghanistan—not least the need for boots on the ground. With the US becoming more isolated, will my right hon. Friend look again at the disastrous plan to reduce the Army by 10,000?

The Prime Minister: The Government are proud of what we have done since we came in to increase the size of our defence commitments by the biggest amount since the end of the cold war. On the hon. Gentleman's point about Afghanistan, the reality is that even when there were 130,000 western troops in the country, it was not possible to subjugate the Taliban, and I am afraid that we are living with the lessons of that today.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Last Friday, a young Afghan constituent told me through tears how his father—a British citizen—was turned away from the Baron hotel in Kabul on 28 August. He was trying to evacuate his other children, but he was refused permission to take two of them out of the country because they were aged 18 and 19. Can the Prime Minister imagine the pain of that family separation? All of them have stayed in Kabul, at huge risk to themselves. Will he look again at the family reunification rules and finally make it possible for families to stay together and not to have to face such a terrible choice?

The Prime Minister: The whole House will be full of sympathy to the family the hon. Member describes and the heartbreak they must have felt. I am sure there are many such cases in Kabul right now, but I think the record of this country in receiving people and being prepared to receive people in the future is very good. I ask her please to write to me or to the Home Secretary directly on the case of that particular family she is talking about.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Many constituents have understandably been in touch, desperately worried about family members in Afghanistan. They want to find out whether the Afghan citizens' resettlement scheme will be an application or an allocation process, when it will open and what that process will look like.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend. We will be making sure that there is a process by which people can apply, but there is clearly a ceiling in the first year of 5,000 and then it goes up to 20,000 over the next few years.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Christians in Afghanistan are one of the many minorities facing persecution, and many have been forced to flee their homes. A church community in my constituency is working around the clock to support several Christian families to flee to Pakistan and to seek asylum at the embassy of a safe third country. They are not looking for asylum in the UK, but to get to Pakistan. What particular support will the right hon. Gentleman's Government offer vulnerable Christians such as those whom the community in my constituency are working with, and to which Department should I direct my entreaties in the hope of actually getting an answer?

The Prime Minister: I thank the church community the hon. and learned Member describes for the work they are doing. On moving people to Pakistan, the Government are helping by increasing the funding available, much of which obviously already goes to Pakistan, and that is the purpose of the increase in the aid budget this year.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Even if we believe that the whole Afghanistan withdrawal was a US-made policy that was ill judged and poorly executed, can I ask my right hon. Friend to reject those voices calling for the United Kingdom to pull back from the United States and seek alternative alliances elsewhere? Surely the right response is to stick closely to our US friends, and to remind them that in an era of globalisation our economic and security interests will be threatened beyond our borders, that the United States is a force for good in the world, and that greater isolationism can only put us all in greater danger.

The Prime Minister: We helped 36 countries to repatriate their nationals or those they had helped, but we could not have done it had it not been for the bravery of the US military and the commitment of the US military, and I passionately agree with what my right hon. Friend has just said about the fundamental importance of our alliance with the United States of America.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The Government leaving vulnerable Afghans and British nationals behind is unforgivable, but what is completely and utterly reprehensible is that the families of two of my constituents, including a seven-month-old child, were forcibly removed from flights and thrown out of Kabul airport on to the streets, the scene of the horrific suicide bombing hours before. I am absolutely furious, and I want to ask the Prime Minister how on earth this potentially fatal decision was allowed to happen, even after I had raised these matters with the Ministers sitting to his left and his right. How many others were ejected from the airport into harm's way, and just what does he have to say to the families that the Government have now put in grave danger?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member very much for raising the case. I have to tell him that I am told we have no evidence of anybody being pulled off

flights, but obviously I would ask him to raise the particular cases directly with my right hon. Friends beside me. But I can tell him that I think, when he looks at the overall record of the UK moving people out of Kabul and across the whole of Afghanistan, it was an astonishing feat.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Has he noticed that the Chinese Government, since our departure from Afghanistan, have used Afghanistan to up their threats on Taiwan, with hundreds of overflights threatening the Taiwanese and telling them that, when the war comes, the US will not be there to support them? Could my right hon. Friend take this opportunity, from the Dispatch Box, to say to the Taiwanese and others that we fully support their right to democracy and self-determination and we will be there to support them no matter what the Chinese say, and could we persuade the Americans to do the same?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend and am of course aware of the continuing issues between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. Indeed, I discussed that recently with the President of the United States, and it is one of the reasons why it is vital that this country continues to insist on the primacy of our relationship with the United States. The situation in Taiwan will continue to be difficult, and the only way forward is to continue to support American global leadership, and that is what we will do.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): As the Prime Minister knows, non-governmental organisations such as the excellent Kent Refugee Action Network provide vital support to those fleeing conflict—and, as he mentioned, that is via fundraising—but does he also acknowledge that the state has a duty of care regarding the mental health of traumatised refugees, including children? If he does, how can he assure the House that this will be possible given that the current average waiting time for young people to access a basic mental health assessment is two to three years?

The Prime Minister: The Government are absolutely determined to look after people coming from Afghanistan, and in particular to look after their mental health and address the trauma they might have suffered, and that is why we are investing massively in the services provided not just by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government but local government across the board.

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): What extra funds will be made available for local schools and councils like the Derbyshire Dales District Council, which urgently want to help but want to make sure that additional funds are available?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend and Derbyshire Dales District Council for stepping up. We will of course make sure that the funds are available, and she should make representations to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins).

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The Prime Minister's handling of the planned departure from Afghanistan is, for those of us who are old enough to remember, akin to one of the farcical characters in "Carry on up the Khyber". The Foreign Secretary was on a beach as the Taliban advanced on Kabul, unknown numbers of British nationals remain left behind, and the Taliban, and most probably ISIS, have been allowed to plunder military hardware and intelligence. Does the Prime Minister accept any personal responsibility for the mess left in Afghanistan, and does he agree that any notion of global Britain is in complete crisis?

The Prime Minister: No, and the hon. Gentleman is wrong in every respect, including what he says about military hardware because that was decommissioned.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The Prime Minister has said that we should judge the Taliban by their actions not their words. The Taliban in Afghanistan have said that they will confine themselves to operating within the rules of Islam. As somebody who comes from a Muslim background and whose father is an imam, and whose grandfather and uncles were imams, I am not an expert on Islam but have a good understanding of the faith. One way forward for the Prime Minister and Government might be this: the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, with 57 member states, to request that Al-Azhar, a leading Islamic school of thought, set out what Islam means for women and religious minorities, as that might give us a way to judge what the Taliban are doing and what Islam stands for.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an interesting suggestion and I encourage it to be taken up. We need to ensure that the elements of the Taliban who are different, as I believe they are, from the Taliban of 1996-9 are encouraged and that we put the maximum pressure on them not to allow the more retrograde elements to have the upper hand. That is what this Government and others around the world are going to do.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Many communities, the city of Leeds included, have always given a very warm welcome to refugees, but we know that the poorest parts of our country have consistently taken a much higher proportion of refugees and asylum seekers than the wealthier areas. Does the Prime Minister think that is fair, and if not, what does he intend to do about it?

The Prime Minister: I believe the whole country should pull together and everybody should step up to the plate. I know that there are councils across the country that will want to help and are helping. I thank the people of Leeds very much for what they have done, both now and historically, and I hope that councils around the UK will follow their example.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, in which he referred to the fact that Saturday is the 20th anniversary of 9/11. Given that public confidence in the Government's strategic thinking has taken quite a bashing from this episode, is it not now time for a cold, hard, strategic look at how well we have done over the last 20 years—what

[*Sir Bernard Jenkin*]

has gone well, the mistakes we have made, what we have learned and what should be done to implement those lessons? Will he undertake to ensure that that reflection takes place?

The Prime Minister: I think the best I can do is direct my hon. Friend once again to the integrated review, which I know that he has studied and I believe is now more relevant than ever.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. Is he aware that there is a desire in industry to help provide refugees with housing and jobs? Two firms in my constituency, Willowbrook Foods and Mash Direct, are keen and willing to give jobs to the Afghans, and also have access to private housing. Goodness always shines through, and we should always remember that. What steps can the Prime Minister take, via the Treasury, to help the system incentivise firms that want to help those who served alongside British forces and whose lives are at risk for their commitment to freedom and democracy in Afghanistan?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point. The labour market is full of vacancies at the moment, and there are obviously opportunities for hard-working people of talent and energy to come and make their lives across the whole of the UK. We will help them with training, with the English language and, as I have been saying, with what else they need.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): In stark contrast with the Leader of the Opposition, whose definition of leadership seems to be silence followed by 20:20 hindsight, I commend the Prime Minister for his leadership in this crisis. I ask him to continue that, on behalf of the UK and the G7, for women and girls in Afghanistan—both for their education and their wider participation in Afghan society.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. The UK is pulling together with our German friends, our Italian friends, our French friends, our American friends—all our G7 colleagues and others—to forge a collective global view, as far as we possibly can, about how to deal with the new regime in Kabul. It is by working together that we will get the best results. The UK, as the whole House knows, is in pole position in all the key institutions, and we will continue to exercise that role.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I realise that the Government's focus at the moment is on refugees and dealing with the immediate crisis, but does the Prime Minister not think that, with tens of thousands of Afghan dead, thousands of American dead and hundreds of British dead, it is time for a full inquiry into the whole process that led us into Afghanistan and the whole notion of a foreign policy in which we intervene all over the world, and that we should start to re-examine our place and our role in this world?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman knows, because he has heard me say it before, that there was a full review after the end of the military operation in 2014—a review of what it achieved and of the legacy of those brave British men and women who served in

Afghanistan. I think that was the right thing to do. As for the rest, I do not know whether he has read the integrated review from cover to cover, but I direct him to it.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Following our ignominious withdrawal from Afghanistan, where we were effectively dragged out on the coat-tails of our more powerful American allies, the world has changed and become a more dangerous place. Will my right hon. Friend share with the House his latest assessment of the so-called special relationship? Is it not time for another defence review?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, whose trenchant views I often agree with, but I think in this case the special relationship—at Carbis Bay I called it the irreplaceable or the indestructible relationship; I cannot remember exactly what phrase I used—is a basic geopolitical fact. On the special relationship rests much of the security of the last 100 years. It will continue to be of cardinal importance to this country. That is a fact that is as understood in Washington as it is in this country.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The Prime Minister has turned his back on the EU, and Washington has turned its back on him. Since he stood on a platform of global Britain, can he tell us where Britain has more influence than we did before he became Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: Virtually everywhere is the answer to that. [*Interruption.*] We have our own sanctions policy. We have been able to set up new embassies and legations around the world. We are opening up in the south Pacific and in Africa. We are doing free trade deals; I think a total of 63 so far. Who knows—there may even be another one this week.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): As the Prime Minister will be aware, the majority of people who came to this country from Afghanistan came via Birmingham airport in my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending the team at Birmingham airport, Solihull Council and third sector organisations such as Entraide at Three Trees Community Centre, who have welcomed nearly 1,000 people a day, sometimes including many, many children and young babies?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I had the opportunity to thank the troops the other day, but I want to thank everybody who has been involved: Border Force officials and everybody in the councils who has been on the frontline dealing with this crisis. They have done it with exceptional humanity and compassion.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I have sent 143 cases of Afghans who are connected to my constituency to the Foreign Secretary, the Defence Secretary and the Home Secretary—all three of them, because there are three different channels. May I urge the Prime Minister to reflect on the idea, suggested by countless colleagues on the Opposition Benches, that there should be a single triage point, a single person who deals with all these cases? Since I sent in those names, one has been shot, one has been raped and one has been tortured. People are desperate to try to get the best result for

these people. I am sure that Ministers want to help, but at the moment it feels as if the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing.

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the whole House sympathises very much with what has happened to those individuals in Afghanistan that the hon. Gentleman describes. We are doing our level best to help people as fast as we can. I want the Government to focus on helping people with a single point of contact. That is why the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) is the person in question.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): The men and women who serve in our armed forces are remarkable and make huge sacrifices, both personally and in their careers. Can my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirm that they will get the very best support and care when they return home, so that they know this nation is grateful for what they have done?

The Prime Minister: Yes. It is absolutely vital that those who have given so much and have served so bravely in Afghanistan, and indeed their families, should receive the lifelong support they deserve—and they will.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My office and I have been trying for several years, through the Home Office, to reunite various Afghan interpreters who settled in Newport with their wives and families. Just hours before the withdrawal, their paperwork came through but they were not able to get through the crowds to flights. We understand that they are not eligible for ARAP. Does that mean that they are included in the resettlement scheme, and what happens now, given that the principle of them joining their husbands has been agreed?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady. I am very sorry to hear what happened at Hamid Karzai International airport. I hope they will be successful under the resettlement scheme. If she would be kind enough to send details through to the Home Secretary, I would be very grateful.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): It is very easy to apportion blame with the benefit of hindsight, but this is a really complex environment and the current situation is as much a failure of leadership in Afghanistan as anything else. While we may not want to engage with the Taliban, does the Prime Minister agree that we have no choice but to do so, perhaps with a forward presence in Kabul in the same way as our Chinese and Russian adversaries?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is very wise in what he says. I believe that it is inevitable for us to engage with the Taliban. Indeed, we have been: at the airport, British troops were working directly with their Taliban counterparts to ensure that the operation went through. That was an inevitability. We will of course look at further co-operation, but as I said to the House, we will judge the new regime in Kabul not by what they say, but by what they do.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Our troops did a great job at Kabul airport, but the events of recent weeks have exposed the limitations of our ability to act outwith the umbrella of the United States, even if we wanted to choose a different path. What is the Prime Minister's response to the exposure of those limitations?

The Prime Minister: I do not agree with what the right hon. Gentleman said. The particular case of Afghanistan was one in which America was very much engaged because of 9/11. It was America that supplied 98% of the air power—98% of the munitions dropped were from the US. It was overwhelmingly a US-led mission, but that does not mean that the UK cannot and will not co-operate with other friends and partners around the world. That is what we are going to continue to do.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): On 167 occasions, all told, I stood with the people of what is now Royal Wootton Bassett to see 345 of our comrades repatriated to this country. On no occasion did I hear anybody say, "Why?" Nobody ever said, "These lives were wasted." Nobody was ever ashamed of what had happened. On the contrary, they were proud of the fact that these young people had given their lives for the service of their country, for the benefit of the people of Afghanistan and for the security of the world. Does the Prime Minister not agree that that should now be the litmus test of how we judge what is happening in Afghanistan? We should be proud of all we have done.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend; I believe he speaks for millions of people—quiet people—up and down this country.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be aware that the entire House is united in offering our respect and congratulations to the people at the grassroots who made the evacuation of British passport holders and Afghans possible in recent weeks, but he must also be aware of how difficult it has been to get responses from Government Departments on behalf of our constituents who are terrified for their relatives and want to arrange safe passage for them. Will the Government give the House an undertaking that they will make sure that the relevant Departments have the resources and the people so that we can communicate with our constituents and give them some news at least?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady. She is repeating a point that has been made across the House by many colleagues this afternoon. The work so far has been extraordinary. I pay tribute to the speed with which British officials have done their best to respond, and every email, as I said, will be answered by tonight.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Some Members did not get in, but hopefully we can pick those questions up in the next statement from the Foreign Secretary.

Afghanistan: FCDO Update

4.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the UK's international response to the situation in Afghanistan.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out, over the last three weeks, through a shared effort right across Government and our armed forces, we have delivered the largest and most complex evacuation in living memory. Between 15 and 29 August, the UK evacuated over 15,000 people from Afghanistan. That includes more than 8,000 British nationals; close to 5,000 Afghans who loyally served the UK, along with their dependants; and about 500 special cases of particularly vulnerable Afghans, including Chevening scholars, journalists, human rights defenders, campaigners for women's rights, judges and many others.

Of course, the work to get people out did not start on 15 August. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office advised British nationals to leave the country in April and again on 6 August; we estimate that about 500 did so. At the same time, the Government launched the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme for interpreters and other Afghan staff, getting more than 1,900 out before the airlift began on 15 August. As the security situation deteriorated, we accelerated that process throughout July and early August. In total, since April, we have helped more than 17,000 people to leave.

I place on record my thanks, and I pay tribute to the herculean efforts of our troops, our diplomats and our civil servants, who have done an incredible job in the toughest of conditions. As we remember their efforts, we also remember those in the UK armed forces who made the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan trying to make that country a better place for the Afghan people.

Now that the evacuation has ended, we have moved into a new phase. We stand by our commitment to support those who have worked for us and to take all remaining eligible cases. Securing their safe passage out of the country is an immediate priority. We are working through our diplomatic channels to that end, and of course the Taliban have given assurances that they will provide safe passage for foreign nationals and those eligible Afghans who wish to leave. On 30 August, the UN Security Council passed resolution 2593, driven by the UK alongside the US and France, affirming the international community's expectation and requirement that the Taliban should follow through on the assurances that they have given.

Last week, I visited Qatar and Pakistan. In Qatar, I met the Emir and the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed, to discuss safe passage alongside the international community's wider approach to dealing with the Taliban. We discussed ongoing efforts to re-establish flights at Kabul airport, where Qatari technical staff are working on the ground, and to see how we can co-operate in handling the organisation of future flights. I also announced our new non-resident chargé d'affaires for Afghanistan, Martin Longden, who is now working out of Doha.

In Pakistan, I met Prime Minister Khan and Foreign Minister Qureshi to discuss safe passage via third countries and the importance of holding the Taliban to their

commitments. I also announced that we are sending £30 million in support to Afghanistan's neighbours. This will provide life-saving support for refugees, including shelters, household necessities, sanitation and other hygiene facilities.

I dispatched last week a new rapid deployment team to the region, with an extra 22 staff in total. They will reinforce our embassy teams and high commission teams in neighbouring countries, processing British nationals or eligible Afghans who are seeking to leave via third countries. We want to do that as fast as we possibly can once they can leave, subject to the necessary security checks.

I also spoke to the Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan earlier today and the Foreign Minister of Tajikistan last week. Our Minister for South Asia and the Commonwealth, Lord Ahmad, visited Tajikistan last week and will return to the region shortly.

I turn to the wider international strategy. The international community is adjusting, and must adjust, to the new reality in Afghanistan and is recalibrating its approach. The UK is playing a leading role. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister convened G7 leaders on 24 August to discuss a shared response to the situation. That followed a G7 Foreign Ministers meeting, and we are building a global coalition around four key priorities set out in a UK G7 paper that we have shared with those partners.

First, we must prevent Afghanistan from ever again becoming a safe haven or harbour for terrorists. Secondly, we must prevent a humanitarian disaster and support refugees, wherever possible, in the region. The UK has allocated £286 million in aid for Afghanistan this year. We are supporting Afghanistan's neighbours, as I have set out, and the Home Secretary has set out our resettlement scheme, so we are leading by example, which enables us to encourage others to step up in what will inevitably have to be an international team effort.

Thirdly, we must preserve regional stability, which risks being shattered by the combination of renewed terrorist threat and an exodus of refugees. Fourthly, we must hold the Taliban and other factions to account for their conduct, including and in particular on human rights and on their treatment of women and girls. I am taking that forward through our bilateral partners; we have a G7+ meeting later this week, and the UK is also pressing for further discussions among the permanent members of the UN Security Council. We plan to host an event at the UN General Assembly later this month, as the Prime Minister indicated.

We will not recognise the Taliban, but we will engage, and we will carefully calibrate our actions to the choices that they make and the actions that they take. Given our strategic priorities—the ones that I have specified—we must also set some credible tests to hold the Taliban to the undertakings that they have made on safe passage, on terrorism, on humanitarian access, and on a more inclusive Government. We stand ready to use all the levers at our disposal—political, economic and diplomatic—in that effort. We continue to galvanise the international community and bring together the widest possible group of influential countries to deliver on those strategic priorities, and to exercise the maximum moderating influence on the Taliban that we possibly can. I commend this statement to the House.

4.55 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): These have been a painful and sobering few weeks. Had it not been for the heroic efforts of the armed forces as well as the brave diplomats and civil servants involved in Operation Pitting, many more lives would have been lost and many more people left behind. They reminded us what courage looks like. I want to put on record my thanks to them and to all those who have served in Afghanistan over the last two decades, and also to add my condolences to the families of all those killed in the horrific bombing at Kabul airport.

If more lives are not to be lost, we need some urgent clarity today. What, specifically, is the advice to people trying to leave? Should they stay put and be hunted by the Taliban, or should they make their way to a border and risk being turned back?

Could the Foreign Secretary take care of some basic issues? The Home Office phone number provided for Afghans asks people to hold on for hours, and it is still chargeable. That is pretty easy to fix. Could he have a word with the Home Secretary and get it dealt with? He was not able to tell us how many British nationals are still there, but I imagine he must know by now, so can he tell us? We know that only one security guard from the embassy got out, so what is his plan for the rest? I did a quick check before I left my office today; there are still hundreds of unanswered emails from MPs, and many of them raised that question with the Prime Minister this afternoon. How many staff are now working on this in the Foreign Office, and why has it not been dealt with? If those Members are to get an answer by this evening, can the Foreign Secretary assure us that it will be a real answer and not just a holding response?

Can we have some clarity about who is actually eligible, especially under the ARAP scheme—it is welcome that the Secretary of State for Defence has stayed for the statement—because without clarity about who is eligible, people cannot risk heading to the border? It would be useful to have a much tighter idea of who the eligible people are, particularly the special cases. What is the assurance about safe passage that the Foreign Secretary believes that he has from the Taliban? Does it apply to all those with documentation, or just to the British nationals?

I understand that the technical problems at the airport have now been overcome, and that is welcome, but can the Foreign Secretary tell us a bit more about the diplomatic progress that has been made? How, for example, does he intend to square the circle to comply with the Taliban's refusal to allow a foreign military presence, while also ensuring that those technicians from Turkey or Qatar, or whichever other country is chosen to oversee that operation, can be safeguarded? I very much support his view that it would be wrong to recognise the Taliban as a legitimate Government, but that presents a practical challenge to the countries that are considering stepping in to oversee the airport in respect of how guarantees can be upheld.

May I just say to the Foreign Secretary that the co-ordination between the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence, despite some very hard-working civil servants on the ground who are working round the clock, is still appalling? My office is in touch with a small number of Afghan workers, for example, who have been attached

to intelligence and to MI6 in recent years. They are being treated as special cases under ARAP, and many of them have been waiting for months. I want to place on record my thanks to the Secretary of State of Defence, and also to the Minister for Afghan Resettlement, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who have made themselves available to many of us at all hours and at short notice to assist with some of these cases. Their personal intervention has made a difference, although that is no substitute for a system.

Could the Foreign Secretary also clarify some comments that he made to the Select Committee? He suggested that those who had been cleared to travel as part of Operation Pitting would now have to undergo security checks before being accepted on to ARAP. Were those checks not initially done, or is he now reneging on his promise? I have to say that both those scenarios concern us greatly. These are practical issues that are within the Foreign Secretary's gift, and the fact that they have still not been dealt with sends a strong message that he has been more focused in recent days on keeping his job than on actually doing it. I want him to prove us wrong, because a lot rides on this, including the lives of many Afghans who assisted us.

Will the Foreign Secretary say a bit more about how the UK is going to get aid into Afghanistan to those who need it? I have been in touch with aid workers on the ground, many of whom are female and who have been banned from working by the Taliban. Those aid agencies are understandably saying that they will not operate with those conditions in place, but that means that they are not operating at all. On the refugee crisis, I say to him gently that countries in the region are not hugely impressed by the Home Secretary's decision to cap the number of refugees that the UK will accept at 5,000 when they are dealing with a far greater refugee crisis. A bit of generosity from the UK would go a long way to helping to resolve the issues at the borders.

These are immediate concerns, but we are also concerned that for a generation of young Afghans, the future that they had expected is unravelling in front of their eyes. Can the Foreign Secretary say something about how the rights of the LGBT+ community will be upheld, as well as those of religious minorities? Can he outline the measures that he intends to take to set conditions for the Taliban regime, particularly that the situation of women and girls will be the cornerstone of any future engagement?

Our intelligence has been downgraded, our diplomats and troops are no longer on the ground and the Prime Minister appeared to say in his statement just now that the risk posed to the UK was unknown. The Foreign Secretary has suggested in a media interview that we would rely on open-source intelligence. Could he say some more about that, and about the possibility that we might be in a position where we are sharing intelligence with countries such as China and Russia? Given the significant national security implications of that, the House has a right to understand the Government's strategy on it, if there is one. This has been nothing short of a disaster, so I ask him now to turn with humility to the world and to start to repair some of those broken relationships, trashed alliances and broken promises that have reduced us to a position where we are reliant on the Taliban for permission to safeguard our own citizens and negotiating with China and Russia

[Lisa Nandy]

in our own interests? In the cold, hard light of what has unfolded over this summer, surely it is time for him to rethink his approach to the way that Britain engages with the rest of the world.

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for what she said about the efforts of our UK forces and the cross-Whitehall teams who have delivered the biggest evacuation in living memory. She asked for specific advice, but she will understand that I am a bit reticent about giving personal advice generically. However, the travel advice that the FCDO is putting out is very clear. It has been changed to reflect the situation on the ground, and it is the right point of reference for constituents and for hon. Members around the House.

The hon. Lady asked about phone calls into the FCDO crisis centre. Since 11 August, it has handled more than 44,000 calls and we have surged 45 members of FCDO staff and 35 staff from other Departments. Since 19 August, we have answered well over 90%—93%—of the total number received, and on every day since 24 August, our call handlers have answered more than 94% of the calls that were made. Just to give the hon. Lady a sense of this, since 20 August the average wait times have been less than a minute.

The hon. Lady also asked about correspondence. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear, we will have replied to all MPs' emails received by 30 August asking for an update by today. That will signpost them to the specific advice relevant to the particular case that they are raising. We will also respond to all the other emails that we have received from members of the public. She also made the point, as have other Labour Members, about putting them all in together, but these are different cases. The eligibility for nationality is different from the resettlement scheme, which is different from ARAP, so it is right that they are triaged to the proper decision maker. That is the point of the exercise that we are engaged in.

The hon. Lady asked about the details of the ARAP scheme. They have been published, so the details are there—[*Interruption.*] If she is concerned about any particular aspects of it, she should of course approach the relevant Minister. She asked about safe passage and—[*Interruption.*] We cannot answer her questions in the abstract to give effect to the circumstances of the cases she is referring to. She asked about safe passage. The Taliban have given us an assurance that those nationals and those who worked for us and want to leave will be allowed to leave, but like a range of other commitments they have made, we will have to hold them to that. These will form one of the early tests for the Taliban, and they will be judged by what they do rather than by what they say. The hon. Lady talks about influence, and that was the reason that we passed the United Nations Security Council resolution—we led this with the French and the Americans—that reiterated, affirmed and applied the international community's imprimatur on that demand of the Taliban. We will now have to see whether they can pass that test.

Kabul airport is not up and running yet, but there are ongoing efforts to deal with not only its operational and technical capacity but its security conditions. For most cases, whether British nationals, ARAP or special cases under the resettlement scheme, it would be most

straightforward if we can safely see Kabul airport up and running. If not, we will have to look at third-country routes out, but of course many third countries in the region are very nervous. We have had conversations with all of them, which is why I was in Qatar and Pakistan, to look at the practical arrangements for delivery.

Of course we will make sure that we check the eligibility of those who want to come to the UK, so that seats on planes go to those we want to come, those who are eligible to come and those we need to come, and we will also make sure that the security checks are in place so that we avoid the wrong kind of people coming to the UK.

The hon. Lady asked how we can ensure that the aid going into Afghanistan gets to where it needs to go. As I announced last week, we have provided £30 million for neighbouring countries to deal with refugees in the region precisely because it is better for refugees to be dealt with closer to their home, but also because we recognise the burden that will be placed on the region.

On aid more generally and the rest of the £286 million, this is another of the early tests for the Taliban. If they want to avoid the collapse of Afghanistan's social and economic fabric and if they want aid to continue flowing, they will need to provide a safe operating environment for the UN and other agencies. I spoke to the UN Secretary-General's special envoy, Jean Arnault, about that.

We have further meetings this week with the G7+, and I will have further conversations—I am sure I will be travelling to the region. The UK has issued a G7 paper setting out the key priorities, from counter-terrorism to the humanitarian lifeline, and it has been very well received. Working with our partners, we now have to operationalise that paper.

The hon. Lady asked about non-G7 partners. The reality is that, if we want to influence the Taliban in the most effective way possible, we need a broader caucus, particularly with regional countries that have a relationship with the Taliban, to exercise the maximum moderating influence, and that is just what we are doing.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I too am grateful for advance sight of the statement.

The impression we have been given of ministerial communications with Members of this House on constituency cases is not as rosy as has been put forward by Ministers. I constructively suggest that there needs to be a proper review of how adequate things actually were, because our experience is that communications were not as good as we have been told.

I am glad to see that the new resettlement scheme is now moving, but I would like to unpack what 20,000 people over the coming years actually means. It is a good line, but I fear it will not stand analysis. Does it mean that the scheme will close if 20,000 Afghans apply and are processed in the first few months of next year? In that case the scheme is wholly inadequate. Or does it mean there is an annual quota? How long do the UK Government think vulnerable Afghans should wait while the Taliban hunt them down? In that case the scheme is similarly inadequate. We would like to see the scheme expanded and we would like much more clarity, which I understand is coming for the devolved Administrations and local

government, particularly on how family reunion will be counted within those numbers—that is a crucial point for Afghans who are already here and those who are concerned.

On the Foreign Secretary's line about safe and legal routes to this country, in the name of policy coherence surely now is the time for the UK Government to pause the Nationality and Borders Bill because it would penalise many Afghans arriving by other routes. Afghanistan is in chaos, and they will not be able to form an orderly queue in the way one might like. Surely, in the name of policy coherence, one part of the UK Government should not be penalising Afghans arriving here while another part of the UK Government is trying to save them and keep them safe.

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks; he asks perfectly reasonable questions. On the correspondence, I have already set out for the House how we are dealing with that. I just say to him that we had, of course, a surge of cases and indeed requests for updates in the final days of the evacuation. At that time, rightly, we took the decision, and I took the decision, that our focus ought to be on getting as many people as we possibly could out of Afghanistan, on to flights and back home to safety. That is how we have achieved that remarkable figure of more than 15,000 in the space of just a couple of weeks, but of course we want to make sure that colleagues in this House are updated and signposted to the right advice, and that those who have emailed or called directly get the advice they need.

The hon. Gentleman asked a range of questions on the resettlement scheme. Those are probably more for the Home Secretary than for me, but let me tell him that the plan is for 5,000 to be resettled this year, with 20,000 over the course of the next few years. That comes on top of the ARAP scheme. I believe we are right not only to lead by example in the way I have described and, on aid, to provide the £30 million to the neighbouring countries so that we can support them in taking those refugees, but to use that leadership by example to corral and cajole other countries to step up. We are not going to be able to take all of the refugees or those wishing to leave Afghanistan. We do our bit, but we also then call on others and use the example we have set to cajole and encourage others to do the same. Further details on the scheme will be set out by the Home Secretary.

The hon. Gentleman also asked whether we would strip out the legislative checks that are applying more broadly. I do not think that is the right thing to do and I do not think our constituents would want us to do it, as we are, in a good-hearted way, making sure that this country is taking in not just our nationals, but those fleeing Afghanistan because they have worked for us or for other reasons. Our constituents will want to see us take a responsible approach and have the checks in place to make sure that that system is not abused.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Congratulations to all involved in Operation Pitting, including my right hon. Friend. It seems unlikely that the Taliban are going to continue to co-operate on the safe passage of Afghans to the UK—in order to safeguard those individuals from the Taliban—so the focus will shift, sadly, to refugee camps in countries surrounding Afghanistan. What read-across does he see between this

situation and the highly successful Syrian resettlement programme? In particular, what measures has he discussed with the UN to triage people, so that we take from among the most vulnerable, as we do with the Syrian programme? Has he engaged with other countries, as we engage with Turkey, for example, in trying to ensure that we take those who are most vulnerable and relocate them back to the UK, to locations such as Wiltshire, where my constituency has done its part in helping people from that particularly challenged part of the world?

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend and pay tribute to his time as a Foreign Office Minister. He is right; we are already consulting the UN. The Prime Minister has spoken to UN Secretary-General. I have spoken to his special envoy for Afghanistan, Jean Arnault,, to talk through these issues and make sure that we get the eligibility and co-ordination right. My right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) is also right to refer to the Syrian precedent. We want to learn the lessons from it, and there was much that was a success there. Of course, the circumstances in Afghanistan are different, and the Home Secretary will set out further details in due course, once we have completed that. It will feed in all of the conversations we are having, not just with the UN, but with allies, including Turkey and other countries around the region.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. May I ask him about the number of requests the Government have already had in respect of Afghan citizens who do not qualify for the ARAP scheme as they did not work directly for us, but who want and need to flee here from Afghanistan and have already asked? I know that the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme is not yet open, but he must already know how many have, through Members of this House or other organisations, already asked to come here because of the Taliban. Can he tell us how many have done so? How will the Government decide who is going to get into the 5,000 cap? The criteria for the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme are yet to be announced, but we know that it is for those who are highly vulnerable to the Taliban because of what they have done in support of the values we and the previous regime were committed to, in particular, women and girls, equality, democracy and human rights. There are bound to be so many more than 5,000, so how will the Government in practice decide between those who will be the lucky 5,000 and be allowed to come here, and those who, although meeting the criteria, will, because of the 5,000 cap, be refused and face a terrible fate at the hands of the Taliban? The reality is that the unless the Government increase the 5,000 cap, the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme is going to end up as a lottery of life and death.

Dominic Raab: I know how passionate the right hon. and learned Lady is about this issue and how assiduous she has been on it. It is difficult to give a precise number of the applications and claims, not least because there is some duplication in the multiple emails and correspondence we have had. She is right to say—frankly, this would be true even if we doubled or tripled the quota—that the number of people who flee Afghanistan is going to outstrip what the UK would be able to take alone. That means that we need to look very carefully at the criteria, as the Home Secretary and I are doing across Government,

[Dominic Raab]

to make sure that we prioritise the most vulnerable and those with a particular link to the UK, as well as co-ordinating with the United Nations. Further details will be set out by the Home Secretary.

As I mentioned earlier, the UK is doing our bit, alongside the aid we are providing, including to support third countries that take refugees. The UK will not be able to deal with the demand alone—of course we would not do so—but by taking action and showing leadership, we will help to corral and cajole other countries to follow suit. That is how we will have a comprehensive and effective response to the Afghanistan situation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I do want to try to get everybody in, but we need to finish the exchanges on this statement by around 5.50 pm. I hope colleagues will bear that in mind.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): The Taliban want cash, international recognition and propaganda coups. I am gravely concerned by the international direction of travel towards recognising them, so will my right hon. Friend reassure me that we are doing all we can to prevent other partner countries from doing so and from giving them any cash? Will he consider using the conflict centre to set up an international mechanism for atrocity management, to make sure that we know exactly what is happening on the ground, that we are monitoring it and that we can reveal the Taliban for who they truly are, internationally and around the world?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right about holding the Taliban to account, particularly in relation to human rights and the approach they take to women and girls. Getting access on the ground is the main challenge, which is why we need to have humanitarian access, first, to provide that lifeline, but also to give us the information that my hon. Friend described.

On recognition, we will not recognise the Taliban—in fact, the UK Government do not recognise Governments as distinct from states. We are encouraging our allies and partners in the region to do as we have done, which is set some early tests for engagement with the Taliban on safe passage, on a permissive environment for humanitarian groups operating on the ground in Afghanistan and on the Taliban's commitment never to allow Afghanistan to be used as a safe haven for terrorism. If the Taliban follow through on those things and show that they can be a constructive partner—albeit at a level of expectation different from that we would have in respect of more like-minded countries—we can see what that can develop into. It is important to engage without bestowing legitimacy on the Taliban regime.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary said in his opening remarks that we must prevent Afghanistan from ever again becoming a haven for terrorist groups, and of course we all agree with that. Did the Foreign Secretary agree with what the Prime Minister said to the House earlier, when he talked about the Taliban cracking down on terrorism? Is that a credible statement from our Prime Minister?

Dominic Raab: There is clearly a difference between the Taliban and groups such as ISIS-K and al-Qaeda. Indeed, there is a suspicion—I would not say more than that—that part of the intention of the ISIS-K attack at Abbey Gate was to target the Taliban. Clearly, if the Taliban want to be an effective Administration of some sort and to avoid all the disastrous mistakes made previously, they will have to live up to the assurances they have made to avoid Afghanistan becoming a harbour or safe haven for terrorism. I share the right hon. Lady's measure of scepticism, but it is right for the international community to hold the Taliban to their commitments, as we did with the UN Security Council resolution last week, and to test what the level of engagement can produce in terms of constructive results.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I welcome the inclusion in the Prime Minister's statement of sexuality as an identified risk for Afghans who need to be rescued. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made a direction on the issue early in the crisis, and in evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee I will report how things went thereafter. I am afraid it was unsatisfactory.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that unlimited objectives—as we set ourselves in Afghanistan when this exercise began—with only limited means will always run the risk of failure? Does he agree that the failure in this case has done awful damage to our values and reinforced the appeal of our enemies? Will he confirm that the Chicago doctrine, which is one of the roots of this situation, alongside a wilful ignorance of history, will have no part in our values and his understanding of how global Britain will operate in future?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I know that he has already raised LGBT rights in relation to the vulnerability of Afghans and the resettlement scheme. I have discussed that directly with the Home Secretary. I understand its importance and we want to make sure that, with the details of the resettlement scheme, we cover all of those who are particularly at risk, and that group clearly is particularly at risk. He asked about interventionism more generally. I think he will see in the integrated review not just a strategic policy for the United Kingdom for the 21st century on tech, on trade, and on the UK as a force for good, but a rigorous approach to reconcile ends with means, and he is right to say that there are lessons for that over 20 years in Afghanistan.

Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I welcome the news that, last week, the Foreign Secretary visited Pakistan, a key player in the region. However, does he accept that it is simply unacceptable that he did not call Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, in the six months before the Taliban takeover given the UK's overwhelming interests in the region at a time of crisis?

Dominic Raab: We have an excellent relationship with Pakistan. The hon. Lady is right that, on my visit, I saw Prime Minister Khan and Foreign Minister Qureshi. The Minister of State, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad, had visited Pakistan in June. All of us—the Prime Minister, through me, and right the way down—made sure that we were in constant contact. The bilateral relationship as well as the country's relevance and

importance on Afghanistan is something very dear to our hearts and we discussed it at length when I was there.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I sincerely thank the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence for their help in evacuating several Kensington-related families. I still have British nationals with Afghan dependant minor children and spouses in Afghanistan. May I encourage my right hon. Friend to urge the Home Office to publish the details of the Afghanistan resettlement scheme as quickly as possible so that these families know where they stand?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I thank her for paying tribute to the cross-Whitehall teams that worked so assiduously under immense pressure. Of course, cases like the one that she describes could be eligible under the nationality criteria, depending on the nature of the dependants, or separately under the resettlement scheme. The particular circumstances will be relevant and important, but, of course, we will make sure that the full details of the resettlement scheme are published shortly.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Government say that the number of British nationals left in Afghanistan is in the low hundreds, but in my constituency alone, I have 11 constituents stuck, including an 18-month-old baby, many of whom witnessed horror at Kabul Airport and, fearing the Taliban, they are now petrified and in hiding. When I contact the Foreign Office about these cases, all I get is cut-and-paste responses. What will the Foreign Secretary do to guarantee their security. Will he give his word that these British nationals will get home safely?

Dominic Raab: Of course we will do everything we conceivably can. One reason why we did not get everyone out was that some were afraid; the conditions on the ground were objectively very challenging. None the less, we are committed, both through our efforts with third countries and also in seeing when and how Kabul Airport can be reopened, to make sure that, as well as the resettlement scheme, we do everything that we can for her cases, in relation to the UK nationals, the qualified independents, the Afghans who worked for us and the other special cases. I am very happy to continue to support her in that endeavour.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What succour will the Foreign Secretary give to the resistance in the Panjshir?

Dominic Raab: We are watching the developments on the ground very carefully, but it is fair to say that the Taliban are in control of the vast majority of Afghanistan. I do not think it is the right thing at the moment to start supporting other groups, notwithstanding our previous role. I say to my right hon. Friend, with an understanding of his passion and knowledge of the issue, that we have to adjust to the new reality on the ground.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I have to say that my blood ran rather cold when the Foreign Secretary suggested that the Home Secretary would have anything to do with helping refugees. However, there are Members around the House who have been supporting Afghan nationals to try to get them out of Afghanistan—people

who have now burned their documents, deleted electronic records, and have even seen their internet profile and footprint deleted by organisations for which they used to work. Can we have a categorical, cast-iron assurance from the Secretary of State today that no one entitled to support to leave when the routes are open will ever be turned away for the absence of a piece of paper or an electronic record?

Dominic Raab: I do not think that the Home Secretary or I—both the children of refugees—need to be lectured on this subject by him in the terms and tone that he used. We will do everything we can to get those who are eligible home, but we are not going to dispense with the basic checks—he calls them “a piece of paper”—that we need to ensure that we keep this country safe from those who are not eligible and would put our safety at risk.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): The Taliban’s values may not have changed, but their use of technology has. What assessment have the Government made of the ways in which the Taliban may be using technologies such as social media to track opponents and spread disinformation, and how can we work with our allies and social media companies to counter this?

Dominic Raab: I am not going to go into too much of the operational detail, but it is fair to say that the new iteration of the Taliban are a more sophisticated operator in many ways—with regard not just to the comms that they are engaged in, but their ability to use technology. That could, at least at one level, have a positive effect, but it also creates new risks and threats, which we will monitor carefully with our allies.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I pay tribute to everyone who worked on the airlift from 15 August.

We had 18 months’ notice that this situation would come about, but I have to say to the Foreign Secretary that the organisation here—for us, raising cases on behalf of our constituents—was nothing short of chaotic, with different phone numbers, a lack of information and a lack of feedback. We still do not know whether anything that we wrote and passed in on behalf of our constituents had any effect whatever. The Foreign Secretary has said that the work to get people to safety started long before 15 August and that 500 UK nationals got out. That does not sound like many. What of those people we had an obligation to in Afghanistan—the Afghanistan nationals who worked with our Government? How many of them did we get out before 15 August?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman issues a fair challenge, but I am afraid that there is an equally fair and reasonable answer. We have standing evacuation plans in place for all high-risk embassies. As I have made clear before, although we considered all eventualities, our central assessment was that there would be a slow deterioration in security from the end of August, after NATO troops were withdrawn. From April, in the run-up to our June G7 summit, I was focused on securing the US assurances to allow us to shift our embassy from the green zone to the airport.

The hon. Gentleman asked about what we were doing in the months that preceded the evacuation. From April, we sped up the relocation of former Afghan staff under the ARAP programme. In answer to his question, in

[Dominic Raab]

that period from April onwards we relocated nearly 2,000 people. We changed our advice in April and again later on, so from April we have been very clear in advising British nationals to consider leaving Afghanistan. Our timing, by way of international comparator, was in sync with our NATO allies. I also point out that commercial flights were running until 14 August. No one—not even the Taliban, I think—had expected them to gain ground as rapidly as they did. I think that is the view among NATO allies. It was certainly also the view of regional partners when I was in the region, in Qatar and Pakistan, last week.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): On the resettlement of the Afghan families—the British citizens and those with the right to remain here—how confident is my right hon. Friend that agreement will be reached with the Taliban and other Governments of neighbouring countries, including Pakistan, so that those needing to cross the border will not be prevented on the one side or turned away on the other? Will that include Iran, for those who have already crossed the border at Herat, and when does he expect the processes and resources will be in place so that we can update constituents?

Dominic Raab: On my last update, although it is changing and very fluid, I think that all the borders have been closed with the exception of Iran's. When I was in Pakistan, the border with Afghanistan had been closed, so let us be very clear: this is going to be a challenge. We want to make sure that we have arrangements in place so that the willingness and the ability to process British cases, whether they are nationals or ARAP-eligible cases, will be seen by these third countries as taking some of the burden off them. At the same time, it would be much more straightforward if the airport at Kabul could be made up and running, but there are not just technical capacity issues with that but the security situation on the ground. We are alive to all these risks. We are working all of them through, including with our allies, and that is why I was in the region last week.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): About 10 days ago, I met Oxford's Hazara community, one of whom described how they had paid exorbitant amounts of money to human traffickers for their family to get to the Pakistan border and then get over the border itself, but they had been turned away because they were not of the right tribe. Can the Foreign Secretary assure us that the Hazaras are considered a vulnerable group, because history, and the present, tells us that they are? When he talks about safe passage, is he specifically considering how people get to the border and over the border, not just what happens to them when they get to the border, because for many of them that is not a possibility?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that ethnic groups—Hazaras and others—would be considered as part of the eligibility in the same way as LGBT people. Effectively we are looking at risk, which will depend on the individual but also the group, and she is right to raise ethnicity as a risk. In relation to getting to the edge of the Afghan border, that will require the Taliban to allow safe passage. I have explained to the

House how we are working on that. We are also engaging with all the regional partners—this is why I was in Pakistan and why I spoke to the Uzbek Foreign Minister earlier today. We want to be clear that we have the capacity to process and give them the assurance to let those individuals across the border, and that we will take them directly back to the UK. I have deployed a team of 15 additional rapid deployment team experts to support that process in the region. But the crucial question at the moment is: will the Taliban offer safe passage and will those other countries in the region be willing to allow at least a measured and controlled opening of their borders?

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) mentioned Herat. There are 572 miles of western border between Iran and Afghanistan. Some 780,000 refugees from Afghanistan are in Iran, and perhaps two or three times that number unregistered. Is there any possibility that we can use exit routes via Herat or elsewhere in Afghanistan to get people to this country?

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend. I know how much first-hand experience he has of these matters from his time in active service. Of course the relationship with the new Government of Iran remains one that will have to be tested, but I can tell him that both through the joint comprehensive plan of action and more broadly, I had a consistent and constructive dialogue with the previous Foreign Minister, and I will certainly remain open to continuing that with his successor. That would allow us to address these wider issues, which I think will be in Iran's interests as well as obviously those of the UK and other countries.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, I have been receiving concerns from people across the United Kingdom regarding the vulnerability of people with disabilities who are at risk. They cannot get to safety in Afghanistan and cannot get to the airport. This is particularly those who are part of ethnic minority groups or religious groups, such as Christians. Will the Foreign Secretary link with the all-party group to make sure that the resettlement programme is inclusive for the most vulnerable and that those with disabilities are never left behind?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for the work that she and the APPG are doing. She raises a really important point. It is a practical point, but one that will only exacerbate people's fear and anxiety, particularly if they are disabled or from an ethnic minority, as she described. I urge her to send me and the Home Secretary any papers or recommendations that the APPG has.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Given the way in which the Taliban have taken a lot of NATO equipment to strengthen their hold on the country, how could we send aid in without the Taliban using or abusing it for their own purposes?

Dominic Raab: We will not give aid to the Taliban. The Taliban have a choice and a set of decisions that they have to make about whether they want to preside over the wholesale economic and social collapse of the fabric of the country. If not, they will have to give

certain assurances. I think that will particularly apply to the permissive environment we would need for aid agencies in order to continue our aid. Again, that falls within the category of early tests for the Taliban, which is why we will engage with them without recognising them.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I also had constituents who could not get to the Baron Hotel as a result of illness and disability. On Saturday, it was reported that British citizens seeking to flee into Uzbekistan were not able to cross the border, while citizens of other states, such as Germany, were able to do so. What steps will the Government take to ensure that British nationals and Afghans eligible for support here are able to safely cross borders and get to safety?

Dominic Raab: I think what the hon. Lady says about the Germany case is not quite right. My understanding is that there was a previous German case that was allowed onward passage, but the border has been closed. I spoke to the Uzbek Foreign Minister earlier today, as I have been speaking with the Foreign Ministers around the region, to try, as we have done in Pakistan, to set up a workable system so that British nationals, Afghan workers and, indeed, other cases that we are willing to take—and we can give that undertaking—can be allowed into Uzbekistan for onward passage to the UK. We are doing everything we can to make sure that that is possible.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): The positive impact of 20 years of education for millions of girls and young women in Afghanistan has changed countless lives for the better. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government will be using every tool at their disposal to place pressure on the Taliban and protect the progress made on the rights of women and girls?

Dominic Raab: British aid allowed 10 million more children to get access to a decent education over that last 20 years. Four out of 10 of them were young girls, who would have never seen a school otherwise. I think that is absolutely one of the crucial social gains that we need to try to consolidate and avoid being rolled back. Whenever I have spoken to any of my G7 partners, or partners in the region, there has been clarity that we need to work together to exercise the maximum moderating influence that we possibly can to make sure that those gains are not lost.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): In the last quarter of 2020, the Home Office was rejecting more than half of all asylum applications from Afghan nationals. Will the Foreign Secretary back up some of the language that he has used today and urge his colleague the Home Secretary to ensure that all Afghan appeals under review are assessed for suitability for a grant of asylum before they are listed and heard in court?

Dominic Raab: I would just say to the hon. Gentleman that I understand the passion with which he speaks. We have taken more than 17,000 people. Many of those are British nationals, but there are also Afghan nationals. We have allocated over the next few years that we will take 20,000, but we cannot take all of them, which is

why it is right to check eligibility and to work with partners in the region and across the world to make sure that they can also bear the burden.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My right hon. Friend might like to note that the Council of Europe will be debating Afghanistan in a matter of weeks. I wonder whether he has seen the pictures that appeared today of musical instruments that have been smashed by the Taliban, who have banned western music. I encourage him to take a special interest in girls and women, particularly those of the Afghan women's orchestra, who are threatened by the Taliban at the moment.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting such cases and pay tribute to his work on the Council of Europe. We are clearly going to face challenging times and need to adjust our thinking to the new reality, but of course we will do everything we can to protect and preserve the gains in relation to girls' education as well as wider social activity, including music.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Earlier, the Prime Minister said to the House,

“tell them that this country and the western world were protected from al-Qaeda in Afghanistan throughout that period.”

The Foreign Secretary furthered that by saying:

“First, we must prevent Afghanistan from ever again becoming a haven...for terrorists.”

I agree entirely with both statements, but we are putting a lot of trust in the murderous, medieval Taliban. What do we do if the training camps and terror networks return?

Dominic Raab: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern, which is probably the single biggest concern of hon. Members across the House. In the last analysis, we reserve the right to exercise the right of self-defence, as we always do. It is not quite right to say that we trust the Taliban or that we can trust the Taliban. We need to be willing to engage and set some early tests—of which this is one—and then monitor them carefully and judge them by what they do, not just what they say.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): Like every Member of this House, I have many constituents who are desperately concerned that they have friends and relatives at imminent risk of reprisals by the Taliban. For them, the crisis is now, not evenly spaced over five years. Will the Foreign Secretary and his colleagues therefore show some flexibility to ensure that, as part of the scheme being worked up, we can rescue those at the time of need?

Dominic Raab: I understand my right hon. Friend's point. It is right to have the resettlement scheme over a number of years, because history tells us that we will be dealing with this challenge for some time. We have also catered for and addressed the immediate short term. We have got more than 17,000 people out, including about 500 special cases of Chevening scholars, female judges, female rights activists, journalists and many others. We are trying to get the right balance between a sustainable long-term strategy and dealing immediately with those fleeing persecution.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Many of my constituents' families are still facing difficulties in getting out, including the family of a 17-year-old constituent who made it to the visa application centre in Islamabad only to find that part of their family reunion paperwork had been lost by officials. Others are awaiting DNA tests and tuberculosis paperwork. What will the Foreign Secretary do to address the paperwork issue? Can I have a meeting urgently to discuss the other 85 cases and over 100 Afghans that my office is supporting?

Dominic Raab: That is one of the reasons why I went to Islamabad, where I talked to the high commission team dealing with and supporting those applications and cases. We are trying to work through them as assiduously as we can. If the hon. Lady has examples of cases that she feels have not been handled properly, she should send them to me and I or Lord Ahmad will be happy to sit down with her.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the work that he is doing and that his team are continuing to do. I appreciate that it is incredibly difficult, but can he give any further detail on his assessment of the timeframe to help those British nationals still stuck in Kabul?

Dominic Raab: I appreciate what my hon. Friend says. The reality is that it will depend on two factors. The first is the ability to get Kabul up and running. That is in many ways the more straightforward, because by engaging with the Qataris in particular, we could not only get easier and more direct access out of the country but look at what we could do on eligibility pre-checks and such things.

If not, the alternative is third countries. I imagine that many of the third countries are anxious about a potential exodus, so we must approach them with a view to supporting them to take cases that would come to the UK. I cannot give my hon. Friend a definitive timeframe, but I was out in Qatar, which is helping on the airport, and in Pakistan, which of the neighbouring countries is probably the most likely destination for those leaving, precisely to work through those arrangements and to make clear what we will do to co-operate and co-ordinate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. If we have very short questions and short answers, we will possibly get through everybody.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): As of this morning, I had received urgent, heartbreaking pleas from 289 constituents of mine about well over 1,500 of their loved ones desperate to get out of Afghanistan. My team and I have been doing everything we can to help, but we need the Government to respond and to be clear about what options people might have. Can the Secretary of State make it clear whether the response the Prime Minister promised today will include a specific response to the inquiries that I and other MPs have raised, and can he confirm when the eligibility for the Afghan citizens' resettlement scheme will be published?

Dominic Raab: We will do everything we can to support the hon. Member, and indeed hon. Members across the House. The thing to understand is that there

are three separate ways of being eligible to come to the UK. We want to triage the cases, and point people in the direction of the right port of call and give them the right advice for each one of those three channels, rather than mixing them together, given that they do not have the same eligibility criteria.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree with me that it is strange to hear the Labour party criticise the Government for unnecessary withdrawal from Afghanistan when the shadow Foreign Secretary said that the mission had "outlived its usefulness" only in July?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The truth is that throughout this crisis we have had a litany of critique without really very serious or credible suggestions for doing anything alternative. The reality is also—I want to recognise this—that beyond the Labour Front Bench there are hon. Members across the House who have very legitimate and genuine concerns, and we are doing everything we can to support those.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Does the Foreign Secretary believe he would be more successful in his attempts to persuade the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan to keep or indeed make sure that their borders are open to refugees if our country took more than a desultory 5,000 as a limit, and saw that as a minimum number of refugees we would take rather than a maximum?

Dominic Raab: I understand the point the hon. Gentleman makes, but I think there is no country proportionally doing more, if we take not only what we are doing on the resettlement scheme, but the 17,000 who have come back to the UK and the £30 million that I announced at the end of last week to support those third countries. I think it is right that we do our bit, but I have to say to him that I also think it is right, as a matter of policy and of moral responsibility, to try to allow refugees to be settled closer to their home so that in the future they may be able to return.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of China's growing involvement in Afghanistan, the geopolitical consequences and the UK's response to that?

Dominic Raab: I have spoken to my counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and I will speak to him again in the near future. There is a lot of talk about how China wants to rush in and fill the vacuum in Afghanistan, but I have to say that I am not entirely convinced that it does want to bear the entirety of the burden, whether it is the security and the terrorist burden or the financial burden of a country in such a precarious, fragile position. While we have many areas that are challenging with China, actually this is something where there are some commonalities of views and interests. I think in a situation such as this, whether it is China or other countries in the region, we need to try to work together, because we are much more likely, if we do so, to exercise maximum moderating influence on the Taliban, and that is what will yield results.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): With the Taliban takeover, many of my constituents who are Hazara Shi'a fear for their families' safety. There is also

a minority Uyghur community in Afghanistan who are in hiding, scared that they will be handed over to China. What steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to protect these minorities?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who I think raises a very real issue. As I have already said to the House, we will make sure that vulnerability based on ethnicity will be considered in the resettlement scheme, and it is crucial—and I refer to the G7 paper the UK has put forward—that one of the things on which we will have to judge the Taliban and one of the early tests will be whether they are serious about being a more inclusive Government, and that will mean human rights obviously in relation to women but also their treatment of ethnic minorities.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): When we designed the Syrian resettlement scheme, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees played a crucial role as an independent and neutral party to identify those eligible for resettlement and then make the connections with the authorities of the countries willing to take them in, including the UK. What discussions have taken place between the Government and the UNHCR doing this work, and if it is my right hon. Friend's view that the UNHCR is not going to be able to undertake that in this different situation, who does he feel is best placed to undertake that key role?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend raises a good point. The Prime Minister has spoken to the UN Secretary-General, including on this, and I spoke to Jean Arnault, the special representative on Afghanistan. Without giving all the details, I can say that of course the relationship with the UN will be one of the critical factors we consider in shaping the resettlement scheme.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Government's Nationality and Borders Bill would see hundreds, possibly thousands, of Afghan asylum seekers arriving in this country in the months ahead and being prosecuted in criminal courts and imprisoned for up to four years. How can the Foreign Secretary possibly justify that proposal?

Dominic Raab: We want to be a safe haven for those fleeing persecution, but we also want to encourage people to take legal and lawful routes, and that is why we have set them out. We do not want to encourage the kind of situation we see across the channel; we want to ensure that people come through the right channels. That is the right, balanced approach, and I think it is what our constituents would expect.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): While the Taliban's PR skills seem to have improved over the past 20 years, it is not yet clear that the new regime is any less evil or oppressive. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that there should not be any question of either Britain or our international partners recognising the Taliban Government until we can be sure they will meet their commitments on human rights, terrorism and humanitarian access?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend nails it: we do not intend to recognise the Taliban. The UK Government do not as a matter of practice recognise Governments,

and the reason why is that that allows us to engage, and measure and calibrate our level of engagement, based on what the authorities do, not just what they say. The issues and tests that he identifies are the right ones, and we will be watching very carefully what the Taliban do in the weeks and months ahead. I would just say that while my scepticism runs quite deep, there was some evidence in the engagement we had on the ground in relation to the airport that it is possible to have a rational and constructive engagement and be able to test whether they will keep their word. That was an early test; the ones that my hon. Friend described will be the next ones we have to face.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Prime Minister spoke earlier about helping Afghan friends of this country, but having been approached by some concerned constituents and having corresponded with the Home Office, the MOD and the FCDO, it was extremely difficult to get any clarity about plans for the evacuation of British Council employees, former employees and their families. Eventually I was advised that even current British Council staff are not eligible for early relocation. Can the Foreign Secretary explain this very disappointing decision, and what plans are now being put in place to help these Afghan nationals who put their own and their families' lives in danger by supporting the British Council over the past 20 years?

Dominic Raab: I do not think that is quite right: we have been willing to look at British Council cases, although of course this depends on the level of association. More generally, if the hon. Lady has particular examples where she thinks that that has not been done, she should write to me and I will look at them personally.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary say a little more about his assessment of the characteristics of the Taliban, and does he agree that one feature they have demonstrated is extraordinary patience over 20 years, so that if, as some had called for, the occupation by allied forces had remained for longer the Taliban would simply have waited that extra time before making their move for power?

Dominic Raab: It is difficult to assess and judge that with any precision, but one thing is clear: the Taliban have proved a very effective military force. The question is whether they can turn that into not just governing Afghanistan in a way that is more inclusive and moderate but demonstrate the technical skills and capacity to, for instance, set a budget or get the airport up and running. These bread and butter issues away from the polemics of whether the Taliban have had a wholesale Damascene conversion will be among the most important tests in the weeks ahead. The Taliban at a political level are currently engaged in the process of forming a Government, and we will be looking very carefully at the character and composition of what is announced in due course.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): What engagement will be undertaken with regional multi-state security collaborations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, whose members all have an interest in checking international terror groups based in Afghanistan?

Dominic Raab: That is probably more the Home Secretary's domain than mine, but we will of course want to assess very carefully with all our key partners and all the sources at our disposal the nature of the security threat, and we are monitoring that in real time.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): How careful are the Government going to be about not revealing very large numbers of names of people with a claim to come here to the Taliban until we know they will assist them in coming here rather than lock them up?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We are going to have to test this; this is one of the early tests. The evidence from the period of the evacuation suggests, given the numbers we referred to—over 17,000 people, with a huge number of Afghan nationals, and the 500 cases of particularly vulnerable Afghans such as journalists, judges, Chevening scholars and women's rights activists—that the Taliban are able to give an assurance and then keep to it. The question is whether we can build that into a steadier understanding to deal with the outstanding cases.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that the Taliban have agreed for British nationals to leave Afghanistan. Does that include eligible immediate family members? Can he confirm what exit routes have been agreed with the Taliban and say more about the timescales—are we looking at days, weeks or months? Finally, can he also say more about the economic leverage the Government and our allies have over the Taliban?

Dominic Raab: In terms of the eligibility of dependants, the Taliban have not gone into that level of granular detail, but if there is a clear case of a British national and immediate dependants we would expect to be able to include them, and so far through the evacuation that has been the case. The hon. Lady asked a series of other questions which are perfectly legitimate. We will have to see whether the Taliban are willing to allow safe passage. At present the challenge is that most third countries have locked their borders, so that challenge is coming externally, but for understandable reasons we are working and willing to engage not just with the Taliban but with all the countries in the region so that any of our cases that get to the border can be processed.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): First, may I thank the Foreign Secretary for all he has done and for today's statement? I have a specific question. The Prime Minister has said that we are looking to set up a contact group or broader coalition. What is the timeline for setting up this contact group and what will be the specific criteria for membership—counter-terrorism, humanitarian, nation building? Also, will the format be based on P5 plus region and plus other countries from the middle east to get the money?

Dominic Raab: The truth is that all the points my hon. Friend made are relevant considerations. Ideally, we would want the UN to co-ordinate as that would give it independence and objectivity. All the groups he described would need to be considered. Of course they do not all get on with each other, so this is also about the art of the possible, but I am following through on

that this week. We are trying to establish a core of a P5 consensus although that is not entirely straightforward, and then we will want to consider all the different regional partners, which do not all have perfect relationships with each other. This is partly about the factors my hon. Friend described but it is also about the art of the possible. It is clear, however, that we need a much broader group to be more effective in exercising a moderating influence on the Taliban.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Did the right hon. Gentleman's Department provide a risk and needs assessment to help the Home Secretary draw up the figure of 20,000 as the proper number of people to be resettled? What advice is it providing about identifying the 5,000 most in need to come in the first year? What advice is it providing to the Home Secretary about selecting the next 15,000? They need help, but not for a few years apparently. What support are they going to get in intervening years before they are allowed to come to the UK?

Dominic Raab: Of course, we are advising and working very closely with the Home Office on the new resettlement scheme and the eligibility criteria, in the way that the hon. Gentleman described. If we had just made a year 1 commitment, he would probably be saying, "But what about year 2, year 3 and year 4?" I think it is right that we look at both the short term and the medium term, and the Home Secretary will set out full details in due course.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): People in Stroud were really distressed to see the footage of a baby being handed over to an American soldier at Kabul airport. We know that there are thousands of orphans stranded in Afghanistan, and they are at risk of radicalisation and abuse. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that children and orphans are a focus of UK support and say a little more about how we are achieving that?

Dominic Raab: No one could fail to be moved by the heart-rending scenes at Kabul airport—the one my hon. Friend described and others. We will of course look at what we can do in relation to orphans and unaccompanied minors. The real challenge will be getting verifiable details about their parents—whether they are still alive or whether there are members of the wider family. In the first instance—this has been our experience more generally across the middle east and in war-torn countries—we want to try to see whether it is possible to reunite children with either their parents, if it is safe to do so, or wider members of their family.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As is the case for many MPs, many of my constituents who are British have family dependants in Afghanistan, and a number are saying that they want to go to a third country, such as Pakistan, to get them out. I am advising them to wait until they get advice from the Government, but is the Foreign Secretary having serious discussions with the Home Secretary about expediting cases that are already in the system, with the biometrics and paperwork already in place, to see whether we can get those people through quickly to avoid clogging up the infrastructure in those third countries?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Of course, if there is a stock of cases that are good to go because those checks have already been done, we want to make sure that we are ready for the first flights out of Kabul, or indeed the first access that we can get via a third country, so that is very much on my mind and the Home Secretary's.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Over the past 20 years, and especially in the most recent weeks, we have been able to see and hear so much about what is going on in Afghanistan thanks to the bravery of many local journalists—especially women, who of course were not allowed even to work under the previous Taliban regime. Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising them for their courageous work, and can he confirm that those who now feel at risk and need to leave the country are included in the category of special cases?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Not only are they included, but among the broadly 500 special cases that have been evacuated out of Afghanistan, there have been a significant number of journalists. Of course, we will continue to process those kinds of cases.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Thanks to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), we are all cognisant of the fact that the Foreign Office was acutely aware of the rapidly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan in July—22 July rings a particular bell. Despite that, the Foreign Secretary still proceeded to go on his holidays. When is he going to find a backbone and resign?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman referred to the risk report that the management board received in July. That is a standard monthly report that goes to senior officials. It did not contain any novel or new intelligence assessment. What the July document made clear was that our central planning assumption at the time was that the peace process in Afghanistan would probably run for a further six months. We followed all that advice while at the same time preparing our contingency plans for the evacuation.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Chris Law. Ah, not here. Brendan O'Hara.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): An easy mistake to make, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Spirit Aid, the charity founded by the Scottish actor David Hayman, currently has doctors, teachers and others, and their families, stranded in Afghanistan. On 25 August, 28 August and again on 3 September, I contacted the Foreign Office, the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence. I have no idea whether those emails have even been opened. Will the Secretary of

State commit to open the emails and read the names of the people on those lists? When will he be in a position to tell me and, more importantly, those terrified people in Afghanistan exactly where they stand?

Dominic Raab: I explained why there was a backlog of emails; it was partly due to the surge of new contact that we received in the narrowing window of the evacuation and the decision consciously to focus on the resource of getting people on to the flights. However, as has already been said before the House, we will make sure that we give a response to all the hon. Members' emails that we have received by close of play today, with the relevant triaging and signposting to the specific Department that is processing that type of claim.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I have a constituent, a British national, who was left behind when the evacuations ended. The Foreign Office has point-blank refused to even take his contact details or name. He has since risked his life to get to the border, as instructed, but been refused entry to both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, while watching other foreign nationals freely enter those countries. Will the Foreign Secretary please confirm why it has taken until today to speak to his counterparts in those countries and when he expects to get an agreement so that British nationals can enter those countries to return home?

Dominic Raab: I am afraid that the hon. Lady is not quite right. Most of those countries have closed their borders. We have spoken to all of them, pressing for a third-country facility to get any UK nationals, or indeed other ARAP cases, out. They are obviously concerned about encouraging a flow of refugees. If she has had specific problems with a case, she should get in contact with me, and I or Lord Ahmad will reply and look personally at that case.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the last 20 years, Christianity has grown greatly in Afghanistan. More than 200 missionaries have come from different parts of the world to preach the gospel and have made that very clear. Many Afghans have accepted Christianity as their faith. The fall of Government means that those Christians across Afghanistan are under great threat. Never has there been a fear quite like it. What can be done to help Christians in Afghanistan at this time, to get them out and get them into the free world again?

Dominic Raab: Of course, those fleeing persecution or in fear for their life because of not just ethnicity but religious belief will be part of the considerations for the resettlement scheme. More broadly, providing some reassurance to those different communities in Afghanistan will be a critical first test for the Taliban. As the UN Security Council resolution that the United Kingdom pressed for makes clear, we will be holding the Taliban to those commitments and assurances that they have made.

Covid-19 Update

6.6 pm

The Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment (Nadhim Zahawi): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will update the House on covid-19 and our vaccination programme.

Earlier this summer, we took the fourth step on our road map. We were able to take that step because of our vaccines and the way that they are working. The latest data from Public Health England estimates that our jabs have prevented over 100,000 deaths, over 143,000 hospitalisations and around 24 million infections. Across the United Kingdom, we have administered over 91 million vaccines; 88.8% of people over 16 have had their first dose, and 79.8% have had their second dose. Our jabs are building a vast wall of defence for the British people.

But this vital work is not yet complete. With the delta variant sweeping around the world, we have seen how it thrives on pockets of unvaccinated people. Last week, across the UK, we saw an average of 34,000 new cases and 938 hospitalisations each day. It is vital that we continue to plug the gaps in our defences and widen and deepen our wall of defence.

Over the summer, we have continued to do that in several ways. In August, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation recommended that vaccines should be offered to 16 and 17-year-olds. It also recommended jabs for 12 to 15-year-olds with specific underlying health conditions and household contacts of someone who is immunosuppressed. We accepted both recommendations, bringing us into line with countries such as Sweden. In recent weeks, 16 and 17-year-olds have been coming out to do their bit in droves, travelling with schoolmates and family members to get the jab.

We are taking the jab to people, too, with walk-in and pop-up vaccination sites at football stadiums and shopping centres, and of course at university freshers' fairs; I think we have got to 20 universities. Over the bank holiday weekend, NHS pop-up sites at the Leeds and Reading festivals made picking up a jab as easy as getting a beer or a burger. As a result of these kinds of efforts, more than half of 16 and 17-year-olds across the United Kingdom have received their jabs since becoming eligible last month. That is in addition to over three in four—76.3%—18 to 34 year-olds, who have already had at least their first dose. Much of young people's enthusiasm, I believe, comes from the fact that they have seen at first hand the chaos that covid-19 can bring. They have sacrificed so much and shown that age is no barrier to public spirit. I am sure the whole House will join me in thanking them for playing their part in helping us all to live safely.

On Friday, the JCVI outlined its recommendations on the vaccination of children aged 12 to 15 years who do not have underlying health conditions. It concluded that while there are benefits to vaccinating this cohort, taken purely on health terms the benefit is finely balanced. Building on the JCVI's advice, we will now consider advice from the UK's four chief medical officers and make a decision shortly. We have already accepted the JCVI's recommendation that 12 to 15-year-olds with the following conditions become eligible: haematological malignancy, sickle cell disease, type 1 diabetes, congenital heart disease and poorly controlled asthma. That will amount to an extra 200,000 teens becoming eligible.

I also want to take this opportunity to address vaccination in pregnant women. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Royal College of Midwives have both recommended vaccination as one of the best defences for pregnant women against severe covid infection. Extensive real world data show our vaccines are safe and highly effective for pregnant women. We now know that pregnant women are more likely to become seriously ill from covid if they are not vaccinated. In fact, 98% of pregnant women in hospital due to covid-19 are unvaccinated. Yet we also know that not one single pregnant woman with two jabs has required hospitalisation with covid-19. I urge pregnant women to continue to come forward and get the jab. Our new Preg-CoV trial is advancing knowledge on how we can even better protect pregnant women and their babies.

Taking all of that together, our overarching ambition is to widen our wall of defence so that we can protect more and more people. As well as widening that wall of defence, we are deepening it. Last Wednesday, 1 September, the JCVI advised that people with severely weakened immune systems should have a third vaccine dose as part of their primary covid-19 vaccination schedule. It will be offered to people over 12 who were severely immunosuppressed at the time of their first or second dose, such as those with leukaemia, advanced HIV and recent organ transplants. This, I must stress, is separate from any potential booster programme for the rest of the population. The JCVI is still investigating who should receive boosters. Our cov-boost study is comparing immune responses produced by third doses of different brands of vaccines.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Will the Minister give way on that point?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is a statement, so the hon. Gentleman can bob up later if he needs to.

Nadhim Zahawi: As ever, whatever the clinical decision from the JCVI, the NHS will be ready. We will proceed with the same sense of urgency we have had at every point in this campaign.

Vaccines remain our most important line of defence, yet they are not our only line of defence. Regular testing continues to play a crucial part in returning this country to something that feels a bit more like normal. PCR tests remain freely and easily available, and anybody with symptoms should make sure to get tested. Children are returning to classrooms across these islands. I am sure all hon. Members welcome that, as did the Secretary of State for Education at questions this afternoon. They return to an immeasurably better set up: no more home schooling, no more bubbles, teachers vaccinated, and all 16 and 17-year-olds offered a first dose before returning. That matters because we know that face-to-face education is the best place for children and young people.

Rapid testing can uncover hidden cases of the virus at the start of term. Whether it is our constituents or our children, we must encourage people to do it. On their return to school and colleges, students should take two rapid tests on site three to five days apart. They should then continue to test twice weekly at home. To university students, I would also say this: make every

effort to get fully vaccinated before going back. It has never been easier to drop in and get a vaccine and the necessary testing. These are straightforward steps, but they are essential in stopping the spread.

Finally, I am sure the whole House will join me in welcoming the additional £5.4 billion cash injection we are putting into the NHS. This investment will go straight to the frontline, supporting our covid-19 response over the next six months. The funds include £1 billion to help to deliver routine surgery and treatments for patients, and tackle our backlog. The funds take the Government's total support for health services in response to covid-19 to over £34 billion this year alone.

We are widening and deepening our wall of defence. We are getting jabs to more people and getting some people more jabs. We are getting the NHS what it needs. The ask of our NHS colleagues continues to be complex and challenging, yet they rise to it day in, day out. I pay tribute to everyone involved in these lifesaving efforts. We must keep going, and I commend this statement to the House.

6.16 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. Like him, I praise all our NHS staff. I particularly want to associate myself with the remarks about the safety of the vaccine for pregnant women.

Children's health and wellbeing has always been a driving priority of mine. Children may not have been the face of this pandemic, but they have certainly been among its biggest victims. The record will show that I have been asking in this House about the vaccination of adolescents for some months. I of course understand the position of the JCVI and welcome the review on the wider implications for children's wellbeing by the chief medical officers. Should vaccination be recommended and the chief medical officers do recommend vaccination, that will command our full support on the Labour Benches. If the chief medical officers recommend vaccination, will the Minister guarantee that our public health workforce, our health visitors and our school nurses, as well as primary care, will have the resources they need to roll out that vaccination?

Children are back to school. In Leicester, children have been back in school for two weeks. In Scotland, children have been back in school for some weeks also, putting upward pressure on infection rates. If the chief medical officers recommend vaccination, how long does the Minister think it will take to roll out that vaccination? Are we talking months? Are we talking weeks? Are we talking days? If he could give us an indication, I am sure we would all be grateful. The Education Secretary has removed many of the infection control mitigations in schools. We urged Ministers to use the summer holidays to install ventilation, air filtration units and carbon dioxide monitors in schools. How many schools have now had those systems installed?

The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) is the Minister for vaccines. Primary and secondary school children are due to receive a flu vaccine, yet not only is the NHS apparently running out of blood test tubes, with certain vital tests delayed, but we are now told that flu vaccination will be delayed, because deliveries are delayed by two weeks, and GPs are cancelling flu vaccination appointments. This is before we head into

what could be one of the most difficult winters in living memory. What will the Minister do to get a grip of this situation and avoid a flu crisis this winter? If there is a delay in flu vaccines, does he expect that to knock on to any booster jab campaign? Less than a month ago, the Health Secretary said he wanted booster jabs to be given at the same time as flu jabs and he said that they would start this month.

Finally, we of course welcome the new funding for the second half of the financial year and we welcome that it would appear that Ministers have listened to our calls for the discharge to assess funding to be extended, but I think the whole House would agree that surely one of the most heartbreaking, and in my view frankly unforgivable, episodes in the pandemic was the failure to protect care homes and to put that protective ring around care homes as we were promised. If covid has taught us anything, it is that a long-term plan for social care is long overdue and that it should be funded in a fair way. The Minister, along with every Conservative Member, was elected on a manifesto that promised a social care plan and promised no rise in national insurance. The Prime Minister guaranteed no rise in national insurance, but we are told to expect, tomorrow, a rise in national insurance—a tax on workers to pay for a regressive social care policy that simply will not improve the care that people need and deserve. In this House, the Minister used to call national insurance a “tax on jobs”. What would he call a manifesto-breaking national insurance rise now?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his support and his words on the vaccination of pregnant women and the protection that the vaccine offers them.

On the right hon. Member's question about the JCVI advice on 12 to 15-year-olds, the JCVI looked at the very narrow impact of the vaccine on 12 to 15-year-olds, because that is very much its remit. It also advised that the chief medical officers should take a wider look. That is what they are doing as we speak. Panels of experts from local public health as well as other experts are looking at the impact of the vaccine on mental health and the disruption to education specifically for 12 to 15-year-olds. They will come back with recommendations. The JCVI is observing those panels and is very much in the room, as far as that is concerned.

It is also worth reminding the House that the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency has looked at the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines and has approved both vaccines as safe and eligible to be administered to 12 to 15-year-olds. It is not worth our pre-empting the report of the chief medical officers of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Throughout the pandemic, we have operationalised the vaccine programme; we prepare early and we prepare well. To give the right hon. Member a direct answer to his question, the NHS is prepared to administer a vaccine within five working days of any recommendation. That does not pre-empt any recommendation. We did the same when none of the vaccines was approved. Some colleagues will recall Brigadier Phil Prosser explaining at the press conference that we had built the equivalent of the infrastructure of a national supermarket chain and were growing it by 20% every week. We have done the same thing when it comes to all outcomes of the deliberations at the JCVI and what it will ultimately recommend.

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

On education, the Secretary of State for Education addressed many of the issues on the mitigation and controls in schools, as well as testing and the very successful adult vaccination programme that we have delivered, which is now also delivering protection for 16 and 17-year-olds.

I really want to address the point about flu and I hope that we can have a sensible discussion on it. We are being very ambitious on flu. The interim advice from the JCVI is wherever possible to co-administer flu and covid vaccines. Traditionally, flu vaccination begins earlier—it begins now. One of the suppliers, Seqirus, has had a border issue with its Spanish fill-and-finish factory, which it has used for many, many years. This is the first time that it has had this issue. It is meeting the Spanish regulator to see what the issue is. It is being very careful and estimating a one or two-week delay. This will not delay the overall flu vaccination programme at all. Its German and Belgian supply chain has been flowing normally. It is one of the suppliers, so I urge the right hon. Gentleman not to, as a knee-jerk reaction, talk about flu vaccine shortages. We are being incredibly ambitious on flu vaccines—including procuring centrally as well as the traditional procurement through GPs and pharmacies—with a big, big programme.

Wherever possible, we will co-administer. The only caveat I would place on that is that the JCVI has given us only its interim advice on covid. We are not yet there with the cov-boost data, which it will look at. It will give us its final advice on covid. If it chooses a vaccine that requires, for example, a 15-minute observation period, we have a very different challenge in co-administration, but nevertheless, wherever possible, we will co-administer. We have made it possible for vaccinated volunteers to administer flu and covid vaccines.

Finally, on funding, I am glad that the right hon. Member agrees that the £5.4 billion announced today is a good thing. I urge him not to speculate on how we will pay for social care and to wait for the announcement; I am sure that we can then discuss it in this place and in the media.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I have great respect for the excellent job that my right hon. Friend is doing. He will know that Israel shows that even a good vaccination programme does not stop the Delta variant driving up hospitalisations. However, Israel also shows that a booster programme brings down those hospitalisations in as little as two weeks. Given that the big lesson from last year is that acting early can stop the need for lockdowns, as happened in Taiwan, Singapore, Korea and a number of other places, is this not a moment for Ministers to say, “Look, we understand that the scientists want to take their time, but we have a reasonable idea of what they are likely to recommend, so we are going to get on with this booster programme before it is too late”?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s excellent question. I would say two things: first, in many ways, the decision taken by our chief medical officers in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to increase the dosing interval, including for the vaccine that Israel uses—the Pfizer vaccine—from three to 12 weeks, with it now at an optimal eight weeks, was

actually an inspired and clinically incredibly important decision, because it demonstrates, in real-world data, that the durability of the protection is increased over people who have had two jabs with a three-week dosing period. So we are in a slightly more advantageous position, if I can describe it as such.

My right hon. Friend makes an important point on boosters. The booster programme is probably the most important piece of the jigsaw yet to fall into place before we can transition this virus from pandemic to endemic status. I reassure him and the House that the NHS has all the plans in place to deliver the booster programme in what will, in some weeks, probably break our record, which we set in phase 1 of the vaccination programme. The JCVI has given us its interim advice on who needs to boost. It has added, obviously, the immunosuppressed to categories 1 to 4 and it has rightly recommended that we go big on flu. I am equally worried about that. Flu has been non-existent because of the severe social isolation of lockdowns and a big flu season could be detrimental as well. We are ready to go. As soon as cov-boost reports, which is imminent, we will be able to operationalise a massive booster programme.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Minister for his statement and the update on the vaccination roll-out for pregnant women and the roll-out to young people and those who are most clinically vulnerable. I thank our NHS staff across the four nations, who have dealt with wave after wave of the pandemic and are now at the forefront of the vaccination strategy.

We welcome the additional funding and I seek reassurance from the Minister that, particularly when it comes to young people, there is a holistic approach, so that we deal with not just the physical health aspects, but the mental health aspects. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary health group, I have been inundated with concerns from people across the United Kingdom who cannot access services for young people with eating disorders, for those who self-harm and require crisis intervention, and for those who require the diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder to receive the support that they need. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has described a “mental health crisis” that could plague the current generation of children for years to come. Will the Minister acknowledge that a holistic approach is needed, alongside the vaccination strategy, to make sure that we support young people’s mental health and mental health across the generations, as well as to make sure that the funding also reaches the mental health needs of the population at large?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s words of support and for her focus, quite rightly, on mental health. She will know that prior to today’s announcement of £5.4 billion, we also delivered £270 million to primary care for GPs to deal with capacity issues, because they are dealing so well with the covid vaccination programme. However, she makes a very important point that we are very cognisant of and focused on.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): As my hon. Friend said, the Government have referred the question of the mass vaccination of healthy children to the chief medical officer, asking him to take into account wider benefits such as the avoidance of disruption

to education. However, school closures and restrictions are a political choice, not a scientific inevitability, as the wide variation in school days lost by children in countries around the world shows. Does my hon. Friend therefore agree that the CMO should base his recommendation on the benefits and risks to children's health and wellbeing from the vaccination itself, rather than on any potential political decisions that may be taken in future?

Nadhim Zahawi: Without putting words into the mouth of the chief medical officer for England, Chris Whitty, I can tell my hon. Friend that the work that he is conducting with his fellow chief medical officers looks specifically at the impact on 12 to 15-year-olds. However, the JCVI looked particularly at the area in which its competence lies and made a recommendation that the chief medical officer should look beyond that to mental health and other areas. That is why he is convening a group of experts from local public health, as well as the royal colleges.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Minister has some quite fantastic figures about the 16-to-17 cohort, but as a mum of one in west London, may I say that my own boy and all his circle are being diverted to the national booking system? Their generation like doing things at the last minute, so instead can we have more pop-ups and more festivals like the scenes that we saw at Twickenham earlier this year? They do not want to go down the oldies' routes. Failing that, there are schools, which in my day meant the nit nurse.

Nadhim Zahawi: Yes, absolutely. We are making it as easy as possible for them to simply walk in and get their jab.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Given the overwhelming evidence, both moral and practical, against covid vaccine passports, will my hon. Friend rediscover the courage of his own convictions, as he once described the proposal as "discriminatory"? If the idea behind the scheme is not his own, will he kindly convey a message to our right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to desist from his machinations?

Nadhim Zahawi: This is an incredibly difficult area, but let me try to describe the challenge here. To keep industries such as the nightclub industry open and sustainable, especially in the next few months, we have to look very seriously at how we keep them safe and not have super-spreader events. We have seen other countries having to shut down nightclubs the moment they reopen them. The worst thing for the industry is to open and shut, open and shut, which is why we are looking to introduce a covid certificate by the end of September for domestic use in large gatherings indoors, especially where we have seen mass spreader events.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister will be aware that there are 3.7 million clinically extremely vulnerable people in this country who had to shield for many months. Many have continued to shield or take far greater precautions than the rest of us since restrictions have eased, and they have had very slow and inconsistent guidance at times. Will he prioritise that group in totality by prioritising booster jabs for the whole group, not just for the half million most at risk? We really need to keep the most vulnerable people safe.

Nadhim Zahawi: I do not disagree with the hon. Lady; I know what she is talking about. She will have seen the interim advice from the JCVI on phase 1, which is for categories 1 to 4, and phase 2, which is for categories 5 to 9—including category 6, the largest category of those people she describes. The JCVI has yet to deliver its final advice post the cov-boost study data. As we have done throughout the deployment, we will follow the JCVI advice.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The JCVI has assessed the known risks and benefits of the covid vaccine for 12 to 15-year-olds and has not recommended it. As the Minister said, the Health Secretary has now referred the matter to the chief medical officers so that they can look at it from a so-called "broader perspective". Now that children are attending school, half of them have had covid already, they do not need to isolate unless they test positive and they do not need to isolate if they are merely a contact, does the Minister agree that disruption to education will now be much less severe? Furthermore, does he agree that it is not reasonable to use political decisions about schools as leverage to force vaccines on a population of children?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's very thoughtful question. I can reassure her that there is no political decision making; the process that the chief medical officers are undertaking is unencumbered by any political motivation whatsoever. We will absolutely follow their advice, and the JCVI is in the room as they are deliberating. It is important to recall that the JCVI advice was that vaccination is marginally more beneficial to healthy 12 to 15-year olds than non-vaccination, but not enough to recommend a universal vaccination programme. It is also worth reminding the House that we have been vaccinating 12 to 15-year-olds who are more vulnerable to serious infection and hospitalisation, as the JCVI recommended.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): On vaccine passports for nightclubs, the Minister said yesterday:

"The best way we can keep those industries open...is to work with the industry".

Does he recognise that industry representatives do not support the proposal? The Night Time Industries Association has said that

"it will cripple the industry."

Not only is it impractical and indeed unworkable, but it could potentially lead to an increase in illegal events, raves and large house parties—the kind of super-spreader events that the Minister is worried about. In those cases, there will be fewer safety measures. This is a hammer blow for an industry that has suffered more than almost any other over the past year and a half. Will he take its concerns into consideration and think very carefully before bringing such a proposal forward?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Member raises important points from the industry and we will always make sure that we look at them. One piece of feedback from our earlier consultation was that to be able to check IDs, for example, we would want to make this process equally straightforward for the industry.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I completely support—the whole House will concur—the fantastic work that the NHS has done through the

[Sir Mike Penning]

vaccine programme. It is great news that they are coming forward and are ready, but the army of volunteers I saw and worked with in my constituency are exhausted. They need to know up front how often and when they will be needed, because the programme cannot happen without not just vaccinations from the NHS, but the army of people who come forward and put their own lives at risk so others can be safe.

Nadhim Zahawi: My right hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point that we look at every single day. In my ops meetings, we have a section dedicated to the workforce and specifically to the volunteers, so that we can make sure that they are put on notice of where and when we think we will need them. The only caveat that I would add is that we have built a very large infrastructure, but it has to flex depending on the advice from the JCVI, the MHRA and, of course, our chief medical officers.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It will not be lost on many people that the various lines of defence that the Minister listed in his statement did not actually include his plans for vaccine passports, presumably because they do not offer us any defence at all. Taking a leaf from the book of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), may I remind the Minister of what he said on Twitter on 12 January? He wrote:

“We have no plans to introduce vaccine passports...No one has been given or will be required to have a vaccine passport.”

When no less a person than Claire Fox said,

“Good to hear. Again. Can we hold you to this?”,

the Minister replied:

“Yes you can Claire.”

For Claire and the many others like her who want to hold the Minister to his words, may I ask when we will get the vote that he promised us?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman’s question. It is an important question that I want to address head-on, because it is about statements on Twitter; I understand that I am “trending” on Twitter.

I was asked about this by Tom Swarbrick, who replayed to me my February interview. I said to him that the difference between then and now was first that the Delta variant is so much more infectious than the previous variants—it takes only a very few particles for someone to be infected—and secondly that we have learnt from the experience of other countries which attempted to reopen sectors such as the nightclub sector and then had to close them rapidly because of super-spreader events. We do know that 60% of people who have had two jabs will not become infected with the Delta variant and therefore cannot infect someone else, although 40% will and can. This is a relative risk that we want to avoid: what we do not want to do is open the industry and then have to shut it down again because of those super-spreader events.

I hope that I have explained myself to the House. It is important that when politicians have new evidence—new data—they are able to change their minds.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): All UK adults have now been offered a first dose, and I think it is worth reflecting on what a remarkable achievement that is on the part of the country, the volunteers and indeed the

Minister, who deserves a great deal of credit. We have long since protected the vulnerable, and surely very soon we will offer them that booster jab.

Until this point I thought I had understood the strategy completely, but now I am not so sure. What is it? Is it about case numbers, which we still broadcast every day? We never did that when I was in the Minister’s Department and influenza was having a bad year.

My question goes to the heart of the stuff about covid status certification, and about vaccinating healthy children. In short, what is the strategy now? What do the Government mean when they say we must learn to live with covid? Could the Minister give us his view?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s important and thoughtful question, and for his words of encouragement as well.

Let us look at what the vaccines have achieved. We have achieved a situation in which we have weakened—severely weakened—the link between cases going up rapidly, serious infection, hospitalisation and death. We are in a very different place today. This new equilibrium is where we want to be able to head to in steady state. The challenge that will come over the next few weeks and months is that there will be upward pressure on that equilibrium. We may break it in the wrong way because schools are reopening, there will be a higher number of infections, and those infections could seep through to the older age groups who are much more vulnerable. The booster campaign would help to push it the right way, with the infection rates being forced up but not leaking into the most vulnerable. That is why the JCVI stressed that we should boost the most vulnerable first.

I hope that this next challenge will enable us to demonstrate to the world that we are one of the first major economies in the world to bring about the transition of this virus from pandemic to endemic and then live with it over the years to come, through an annual vaccination or inoculation programme.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is interesting to note that the Minister has a short-term job in some respects, as the vaccines Minister. He should perhaps recognise that some of us are in favour of covid passports because they should also be a short-term measure, and it will probably be a sign of his success if they are.

My main point, however, is that the Minister dangled in front of us—although I know that this is not in the written statement that was circulated—the extra money going into the NHS. I have mentioned the short-term nature of the Minister’s job in some respects, but it is long-term funding that is needed. We know that money injected at short notice in large amounts is not always spent very well, even by our beloved health service, and I have direct experience of recruitment processes whereby posts have become pretty much redundant by the time people have been recruited to them. What is the Minister’s Department doing—and what is he doing personally if he has some responsibility in this regard—to ensure that the money will be spent well, and that there is a long-term financial plan for recovery?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s words, including those about the issue of vaccine certification, on which I agree with her. No one in this

Government, and certainly not this Prime Minister—as I said at the weekend, it goes against his DNA—wants to curtail people’s freedoms, so we will not do this lightly at the end of September. As for her question about the funding, let me try and give her some more details.

The £5.4 billion cash injection over the next six months in response to covid-19 includes £1 billion to help tackle the backlog, delivering routine surgery and treatments for patients. As I said in my statement, the total Government support for the health service is £34 billion in this year alone. The funding will go towards helping the NHS to manage the immediate pressure of the pandemic. As I have said, it includes an extra £1 billion to help tackle the backlog, along with £2.8 billion to cover related costs such as those of the enhanced infection control measures that are so important to keep staff and patients safe from the virus, and £478 million to continue the hospital discharge programme, freeing up beds.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Six years ago we lost 28,000 people to seasonal flu. Can the Minister assure me that we will not prioritise the jabbing of 12 to 15-year-olds over the seasonal flu programme, given that the number of children whom we would lose to covid would be vanishingly small in any event? Can he also assure me that in his planning he has considered not only the 15-minute wait that the Pfizer jab requires, but the extra time and effort that are required to get truly informed consent from children whose motivation cannot be clinical, must be altruistic, and may be subject to peer pressure?

Nadhim Zahawi: Let me try to unpack my hon. Friend’s question. First, no decision has been made on vaccinating 12 to 15-year-olds who are healthy. We are vaccinating those who are vulnerable. We will not pre-empt the important work that the chief medical officers are doing and on which they are experts. Operationally, we have the infrastructure to be able to deal with both programmes.

The flu and covid booster campaigns are the largest endeavours. As I said earlier, in some weeks we will probably break the record that we set in the original covid vaccination programme. The flu vaccine is traditionally delivered through the brilliant work of GPs and, of course, community pharmacies, and they are doing that again. They have raised their ambition and ordered more than they did last year—which was a record-breaking year—and we have procured centrally as well. I can reassure my hon. Friend that that is our priority. I worry very much about a bad flu season this year, which is why we have been so much more ambitious in that regard, as well as on the covid booster campaign.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): In his statement, the Minister emphasised that universities should get double jags, but before the recess I highlighted the case of students who had had a jag in Scotland and a jag in England, and had been unable to travel abroad because their covid certification was not clear. At the time, someone from NHS Digital said that they were working on doing the same in England with the NHS covid pass. Given that people who have jags in different parts of the four nations may be discriminated against by vaccine passports, can the Minister provide an update on how that is progressing?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will go back and check, but I am almost certain that the NHS England system is now able to take in data from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in terms of jabs—or jags.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement, and also for recognising the young people who were at low risk but have taken up the offer of a jab to protect more vulnerable people in their families, workplaces and communities.

The figures that the Minister presented on pregnant women needing hospital treatment for covid were very stark. Can he reassure me that pregnant ladies are obtaining advice at the earlier possible opportunity from their GPs or midwives, and are themselves being reassured that the jab is safe for them and for their unborn children? Those figures would certainly hit home with them.

Nadhim Zahawi: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. We have a pretty substantial outreach programme, including webinars with midwives so that they are given all the available tools to ensure that pregnant women are given the protection that they so vitally require.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The effective cut-off for care home staff to get their first jab in order to comply with the Government’s deadline is just 10 days away, and those who are not double-jabbed in time will not be able to work in care homes. However, there has yet to be any unequivocal guidance on who will be exempt from this, and care home managers in my constituency are desperately concerned, especially in the light of the most unprecedented care home staffing crisis in a generation. They are desperate for that guidance. Will the Minister provide it today?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: 11 November is the date by which care homes and care home providers will have to comply with the legislation on the vaccination programme. I would be happy to share with him the guidance and the communication that we have sent out to the sector, and I will write to him after this statement.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I particularly welcome what the Minister had to say about pregnant women. My own daughter is expecting a baby in January, and she found it very difficult to get such definitive advice earlier in the summer, although she has now had her jab. I want to ask the Minister specifically about another issue. How can UK citizens who have had their vaccinations abroad ensure that those vaccinations are held up as valid here in the United Kingdom? For example, I have a constituent who had his AstraZeneca vaccinations in Saudi Arabia and is struggling to have them recognised here.

Nadhim Zahawi: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right; we are working flat out. We have the pilot scheme in which we recognise vaccinations from America and Europe, and we are looking to expand that to other countries so that people who have had a vaccines from a list of approved vaccines in those countries can benefit from the same freedoms that people who have been double-vaccinated in the UK have.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. Can he reaffirm that no child will be vaccinated without explicit parental consent, and that, should consent not be given, that will not affect the child's education in terms of school outings, sporting events or residentials? Does he believe that this protection needs to be further enshrined in law?

Nadhim Zahawi: I repeat to the House that no decision has been made on vaccinating 12 to 15-year-olds. We have to allow the chief medical officers to do the work that they need to do, with the JCVI in the room, and to come back to us. I will return to the House and share with Members the decision that is made. In terms of school-age vaccination programmes in general, parental consent is always required, and the NHS is well-versed in effectively receiving that consent. On the rare occasions when there is a difference of opinion between the child and the parents, the child's competence and level of understanding of the vaccine come into play. NHS clinical advice is very much that that is a rarity, and parental consent is required for school-age vaccination programmes.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): The vaccination roll-out has been excellent; no one can dispute that. However, I have two issues, one of which has just been covered, on the proposals to vaccinate young people. First, if the benefits of doing that are so small and we are vaccinating children to protect the wider public, should we not be asking the many adults who have not yet been vaccinated to get vaccinated now and stop placing further pressure on our young people who have suffered enough to protect the elderly throughout the pandemic? Secondly, if we still decide to offer vaccinations to 12 to 15-year-olds, does my hon. Friend agree that this should ultimately be the parents' decision? I fear that removing the responsibility that parents have for their children in this area, and in many others, could have unknown consequences for family relationships for many years to come.

Nadhim Zahawi: I reiterate that the work that the chief medical officers are carrying out is looking at the impact of this—whether it be educational, psychological or relating to the public health impact—on 12 to 15-year-olds. As I say, they will then come back with their advice, having had the JCVI in the room for those deliberations. Parental consent is required in any school-age vaccination programme, but I do not want to pre-empt this decision. No decision has yet been made, but parental consent would be required. On the very rare occasions when there is a difference of opinion, Gillick competence applies.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): May I take this opportunity—the first one after lockdown, I think—to thank the Minister, his officials and the whole of the national health service for the fantastic job that they have done and for their brilliant roll-out of the vaccine? Will he join me in congratulating the Order of St John, which has done a huge job in carrying out the vaccinations and in training and co-ordinating volunteers? It has done a brilliant job, and it is worthy of our thanks.

Nadhim Zahawi: I will absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating St John's volunteers, who have done a phenomenal job. They really rose to the challenge when

we contacted them and said that we needed them. They delivered in spades. I thank my hon. Friend for all his words: this has been a massive team effort involving the health service, the public sector and of course the private sector as well.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I would like to thank my hon. Friend for the incredible vaccine roll-out; many lives have been saved by it. My question is about domestic vaccine passports, and I have to apologise because I get a bit confused by the nomenclature of what is being proposed. On the one hand, we have what I understand to be vaccine-only passports, which say simply that someone has been vaccinated and that that is all that counts. Then we have covid status certification, which can also include negative testing and proof of recent infection. Crucially, this is not just about whether someone has been vaccinated, because as I understand it, a lateral flow test negative result is the best evidence that someone is no longer infectious. Is my understanding correct that the proposal for the end of September is for vaccine-only domestic vaccine passports? If that is the case, why has that moved from covid status certification?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just before the Minister answers, I must point out that we need to finish this statement fairly shortly. Colleagues should keep their questions very short, and the answers should be correspondingly short.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to my hon. Friend for his question. I guess the reason for the shift by the end of September, when all 18-year-olds will have had the opportunity to get two jabs, is that testing provides a limited protective assurance and allows for the potential for self-testing fraud. The effectiveness of testing-based certification can also be undermined by a single incursion into a setting. Transmission, serious illness and hospitalisation are reduced using vaccination-based certification, even with incursions, so that is the thinking behind this. I reiterate that nobody does this lightly. We do not curtail people's freedoms lightly; this is purely so that we can keep industries and sectors open and not have to close them down again if there is a super-spreader event.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I thank the excellent Minister for coming to the Dispatch Box. When are we going to get the debate and the vote on vaccine passports?

Nadhim Zahawi: Shortly.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): Can my hon. Friend reassure residents in Scunthorpe that the very welcome booster programme will make full use of pharmacies and our fantastic vaccination hubs and, if possible, those routine contacts such as winter flu jab appointments and asthma checks, to ensure that we do not lose any GP appointment time over these much-welcomed boosters?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend is quite right to say that GPs need to do more than just the vaccination programme, the booster programme and the flu vaccination programme. We also have to recognise that they do an incredible job in protecting the most vulnerable from flu, and that they were the backbone of the covid

vaccination programme. We are continuing to work with primary care networks, but we have enhanced the pharmacy offer as well. I will be able to set out more detail on that when we begin the booster programme.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I am sorry to press the Minister on a hot topic, but although I understand the need for limited and specific use of vaccine passports—perhaps in nightclub settings, which are particularly risky, as he has said—the admission yesterday that the proposal had been expanded to include larger venues and gatherings is really beginning to concern my constituents, especially when we have vaccinated around of 80% of the population. Will this be a high water mark for their use, and when will the criterion potentially end?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend has heard me say today that no one embarks on this lightly, and it is not in the Prime Minister's DNA to curtail people's freedoms. It is purely so that we can have sustainable continuation of an open economy that we would introduce such programmes. I do not know—if anyone claims otherwise, they are foolhardy or foolish—when we can definitely say that the virus has transitioned from pandemic to endemic status.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Medical autonomy on vaccinations has been removed from workers in care home settings, so when will medical autonomy be removed from nurses, doctors and consultants in the NHS?

Nadhim Zahawi: In the original consultation on social care conditions of deployment, which we eventually introduced and have discussed today, part of the feedback was that we should consult on the wider health service, including frontline healthcare workers. By the way, I commend both social care and healthcare workers because the majority of them have come forward to be vaccinated. Indeed, more than 94% of frontline healthcare workers have had both doses. We will bring forward a consultation on this, because there is a duty of care for those looking after vulnerable people in hospitals or care homes to be protected against covid.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Delivering covid booster jabs alongside flu vaccinations presents additional operational challenges. Will my hon. Friend do everything possible to co-ordinate these jabs, to ensure that we have very high uptake and to ensure the jabs arrive in Stoke-on-Trent in good time?

Nadhim Zahawi: Yes, I will.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is there any risk to older age groups who, because they are more vulnerable, had both jabs earlier, that the effectiveness of those jabs might wear off sooner and that there might be a gap of vulnerability before they can get their booster shots?

Nadhim Zahawi: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight that there is a group of older patients who received both doses with a three-week dosing interval, not a 12-week dosing interval. They will be our priority when it comes to boosters. The data from Cov-Boost is imminent, as I said earlier. The system is ready and primed to go as soon as we have that data, so that we boost the most vulnerable, including the group to which he refers, as quickly as possible to offer that additional protection.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): During the summer I visited the “Grab a Jab” van in Aylesbury, which proved especially popular with younger people. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating everybody involved in rolling out that vaccination programme and in encouraging all 16 and 17-year-olds in the Aylesbury constituency to get their jab so that they can live a full life, whether studying, working or just having a good time?

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly urge all 16 and 17-year-olds to come forward to get their jab and the protection and freedoms that go with it. I thank the “Grab a Jab” team in Aylesbury for all the work they have done.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The strongest incentive for getting the vaccine is obviously to protect yourself and your loved ones. Although the risk of covid to secondary school-age children may be low, the risk to those they live with could be much higher. Will the chief medical officers consider offering covid vaccines to 12 to 15-year-olds who live with immunosuppressed or other extremely clinically vulnerable people in their household?

Nadhim Zahawi: My understanding is that, for 12 to 15-year-olds who are healthy, the chief medical officer is looking at the impact on them specifically, whether it be their mental health or the other impacts of disruption to education. He is consulting widely with local directors of public health and the Royal Colleges.

Point of Order

7.4 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have told the other Member concerned of my intention to raise this matter tonight.

Over the past two weeks or so, several thousand of my constituents have been direct mailed political material in two names, one of whom is the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and the other holds no elected office of any kind. In this literature the hon. Lady is referred to as the local Member of Parliament, and constituents who receive it are encouraged to contact her with any queries, rather than me.

Is it in order, Madam Deputy Speaker, for a Member of Parliament to target large numbers of residents in a neighbouring constituency with literature that is clearly calculated to create the impression that they, and not me, are the local Member of Parliament? If it is not in order, what corrective action might you suggest?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and I completely understand his concern. I am sure he will understand that I am not responsible for Members' communications with their constituents, and I have not seen the leaflet in question. I am pleased that he has informed the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) of his intention to raise this point of order.

Of course, all hon. and right hon. Members should be accurate in the material they provide to constituents. That includes ensuring that leaflets describing an hon. Member as the local Member of Parliament are, indeed, distributed only within the relevant constituency.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) has put his point on record, and I am pleased he has been in touch with the other hon. Member concerned. Having made that general point about the need for accuracy, which I stress, I hope the two hon. Members can now resolve this matter speedily.

National Insurance Contributions Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

7.7 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before we begin debating the new clauses and amendments to the Bill that have been selected, I want to remind the House that the scope of this debate is limited to whether or not the Bill should be altered or added to by any or all of those amendments and new clauses. This is not an opportunity to debate the Bill as a whole or the national insurance fund in general, and still less to discuss how to fund the NHS or adult social care. I expect that the House will have the chance later in the week to hear from Ministers, if and when they have any new policies to announce with regard to what I have talked about.

New Clause 1

ZERO-RATE CONTRIBUTIONS FOR EMPLOYEES OF GREEN MANUFACTURING COMPANIES

(1) This section applies where—

- (a) a secondary Class 1 contribution is payable as mentioned in section 6(1)(b) of the 1992 Act in respect of earnings paid in a tax week in respect of an employment,
- (b) the green manufacturing condition is met (see section [Green manufacturing condition]), and
- (c) the employer (or, if different, the secondary contributor) elects that this section is to apply in relation to the contribution for the purposes of section 9(1) of the 1992 Act instead of section 9(1A) of that Act or section 1 of this Act.

(2) For the purposes of section 9(1) of whichever of the 1992 Acts would otherwise apply—

- (a) the relevant percentage in respect of any earnings paid in the tax week up to or at the upper secondary threshold is 0%, and
- (b) the relevant percentage in respect of any earnings paid in the tax week above that threshold is the secondary percentage.

(3) The upper secondary threshold (or the prescribed equivalent in relation to earners paid otherwise than weekly) is the amount specified in regulations under section 8.

(4) For the purposes of the 1992 Acts a person is still to be regarded as being liable to pay a secondary Class 1 contribution even if the amount of the contribution is £0 as a result of this section.

(5) The Treasury may by regulations make provision about cases in which subsection (2) is to be treated as applying in relation to contributions payable in respect of a tax week in a given tax year only when—

- (a) that tax year has ended, and
- (b) all contributions payable in respect of a tax week in that tax year have been paid.—(Richard Thomson.)

This new clause provides National Insurance contributions relief for businesses engaged in green manufacturing

Brought up, and read the First time.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—*Green manufacturing condition*—

(1) The green manufacturing condition is that the employer is engaged in the manufacture of products within the categories designated under subsection (2).

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1), the Secretary of State must by regulations designate categories of products that in the opinion of the Secretary of State are manufactured with the aim of increasing environmental standards.

- (3) The categories of products designated must include—
- (a) wind turbines, and
 - (b) electric vehicles.’

This new clause is linked to NC1.

New clause 3—Scottish Government Covid payments: exemption from primary Class 1 contributions—

‘(1) A primary Class 1 contribution is not to be payable in respect of any Scottish Government Covid payment.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1), a “Scottish Government Covid payment” means a payment of £500 pro rata to any NHS Scotland or social care worker in accordance with the announcement made by the Scottish Government on 30 November 2020.’

This new clause provides exemptions for Scottish Government Covid payments to NHS Scotland and social care workers.

New clause 4—Employment allowance for national insurance contributions—

‘(1) In section 1(2)(a)(1) of the National Insurance Contributions Act 2014 (employment allowance for national insurance contributions), for “£4,000” substitute “£16,000”.

(2) The provisions of subsection (1) will remain in force until 30 September 2023 and will then expire unless continued in force by an order under subsection (3).

(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer may by order made by statutory instrument provide that the provisions which are in force will continue in force for a period not exceeding two years from the coming into operation of the order.

(4) No order will be made under subsection (3) unless a draft of the order has been laid before and approved by a resolution of both Houses of Parliament.

(5) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before Parliament a review of the effects of the provisions in subsection (1) on employment, the performance of small businesses and GDP growth no later than 30 September 2023.’

This new clause would quadruple the employment allowance from £4,000 to £16,000 for two years. At the end of the period, the Chancellor of the Exchequer would be required to assess its effects and would be able to seek parliamentary approval for the policy to continue for up to a further two years.

Amendment 1, in clause 2, page 2, line 26, at end insert—

- “(e) the employer pays, as a minimum, a living wage to all staff it employs, and
- (f) the businesses operating in the freeport in which the employer has business premises have collectively—
 - (i) put in place a strategy setting out how the freeport will contribute to the target for net UK emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 as set out in the Climate Change Act 2008 as amended by the Climate Change Act (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019,
 - (ii) put in place a strategy setting out how the businesses will ensure that no goods passing through the freeport are the products of slave labour, and
 - (iii) carried out an environmental impact assessment of the operation of the freeport.”

This amendment provides conditions to businesses in freeports. These include a strategy on how the freeport will contribute to the target for net UK greenhouse gases emissions, a strategy ensuring no goods passing through the freeport are products of slave labour, and an environmental impact assessment of the freeport.

Amendment 2, page 3, line 11, at end insert—

‘(4A) For the purposes of subsection (1)(e), the living wage per hour—

- (a) for the financial year 2021-22 is—

- (i) £9.50 outside of London, and

- (ii) £10.85 inside London; and

(b) for each year after the financial year 2021-22 is to be determined by the Living Wage Foundation.’

This amendment defines the living wage, payment of which is one of the conditions businesses would have to meet under Amendment 1.

Government amendment 3.

Richard Thomson: I rise to support amendments 1 and 2 and new clauses 1 to 3 in my name.

I went over the reasoning for these amendments in some detail on Second Reading and in Committee, so I am sure the House will be relieved to hear that I do not intend to go into quite that level of detail again. The arguments I made then still stand, that the Government should not forgo tax revenues or give advantages to some businesses that are not available to others in terms of national insurance exemptions without securing meaningful commitments in return and in advance.

For that reason, we believe reciprocal benefits should be baked in from the start, both in the strategic economic objectives that we presume are being sought and in ensuring the very best employer behaviour, so that we are incentivising the kind of corporate behaviour that we want to see and encouraging future manufacturing to develop in that way.

We particularly wish to see greenports evolve—greenports are the Scottish Government’s model for freeports—to help tackle the climate crisis and to ensure the protection of workers’ rights. SNP amendments 1 and 2 would help to ensure that freeports and greenports do not end up contributing to a race to the bottom on workers’ rights and broader standards.

New clauses 1 and 2 get to the heart of the matter, by ensuring that employers within the designated freeports pay, as a minimum, a living wage to all staff they employ; by setting out how businesses can ensure that no goods passing through freeports are in any way the product of, or have benefited from the contribution of, slave labour; by setting out how freeports can contribute towards achieving legally binding climate change commitments; and by ensuring that the environmental impact of freeports is properly considered in each case, so that they can be seen as an exemplar, rather than simply being compliant with existing legislation.

We believe firmly that if national insurance exemptions are to be made available, they should be for enterprises that are helping us to transition towards a low-carbon economy. In those new clauses, we have specified two categories of manufacture—wind turbines and electric vehicles—that we consider should be covered. The opportunity is inherent within new clause 2 for the Secretary of State to designate a much wider range of products that also can contribute towards that objective.

We have a choice here: we can grant these incentives and hope—this depends on one’s political taste—that we let 1,000 flowers bloom or that the invisible hand of the market will somehow deliver the economic and social objectives being sought; or, with some judicious framing of the Bill, we can help to increase the likelihood of achieving a set of positive outcomes from those objectives.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I understand the purpose behind the new clause, but new clause 1 refers to “green manufacturing companies”,

[Kevin Hollinrake]

whereas new clause 2 talks about manufacturing products that “include” wind turbines and electric vehicles. So could those companies not undertake all kinds of very polluting activities within their business but still qualify for the exemption for all their employees if they make some wind turbines and electric vehicles? That is how this seems to be drafted.

Richard Thomson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but I do not believe that is the outcome. If we are looking to incentivise, these are a substantial set of incentives, and they have to be for the promotion of what I have described. A phrase that may be familiar in his Thirsk and Malton constituency is, “You shouldn’t get owt for nowt”. That is simply the intention here: to make sure we are getting these objectives that are being sought.

Kevin Hollinrake: They say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. The intention may be something different, but the way the new clauses are drafted and the fact that new clause 2 says “include” means that so long as a company does some of those things, it could burn coal to produce electricity and still qualify under the new clause. That is the position as far as I can ascertain, but the hon. Gentleman may be able to explain the difference.

Richard Thomson: As I say, the hon. Gentleman and I will have to agree to disagree on that. If the Minister or the Government do not believe the new clause can meet the objectives in the way I have set out, it is open to them to try to achieve those objectives in some other way. I have no huge expectation of this new clause making it into the Bill, but the intention is clear, the new clause is clear and the Government should be using this incentive to drive exactly the sort of outcome I have set out.

On new clause 3, the Scottish Government are to be commended for the way in which they have sought to recognise the contribution of our health and social care heroes and how they have responded magnificently throughout the pandemic. It remains a source of great disappointment that the UK Government have not followed suit or supported that by allowing one-off payments to be made free of tax and national insurance, instead treating them as a top-up to wages rather than as a bonus. Rather than having the Scottish Government gross up those payments, as the Minister has previously argued should happen, surely it would be better if the UK Government were simply to exempt the payments from NI. I am certain that if that power was devolved to the Scottish Government to exercise, that is exactly what the Scottish Government would do. This shows the limitations of the current devolved fiscal settlement and the requirement to operate within what are, in essence, fixed budgets, which would make it impossible for the Scottish Government to make those payments net without impacting on other spending lines.

7.15 pm

That sets out clearly the intentions of our provisions. As I say, I do not intend to go on overly long about them, but they are worthy of support. I have no huge expectation that the Government will change their mind, having listened to those arguments and rejected them at

previous stages. Nevertheless, they are important arguments of principle as to what we should be trying to get out of this to match the good intentions, which are clearly there on freeports, in order to achieve positive social and economic outcomes.

As a final plea, I encourage the Minister, once again, as I have at previous stages, to ensure that the UK Government are working at all stages with the Scottish Government to make sure that we can bring forward a form of freeports in Scotland that meets these objectives.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I rise to speak to my new clause 4, which would quadruple the employment allowance from £4,000 to £16,000 for two years. I tabled it for several reasons. The Government’s Bill rightly identifies that changes to national insurance contributions for both employees and employers have a role to play in stimulating economic activity. That is why they wish to have special NI provisions for freeports and, elsewhere in the Bill, for veterans, to help them back into work and stimulate economic activity in freeports. Interestingly, the Government are indicating in this Bill that they see a role that national insurance contributions can play in stimulating economic activity. I will not labour the point, because Madam Deputy Speaker has made the rules clear on that, but we expect to see further announcements later in the week on NICs, which I think will contradict what this Bill is seeking to do.

NICs have an important role to play in stimulating economic activity, and I wish to speak particularly about our small and medium-sized enterprises. So many of them have been hit badly by the pandemic, especially those in our retail, hospitality and tourism sectors. One thing that many of us here can agree on is that as we come out of the pandemic we expect to see some big changes to the way business operates. We expect possibly to see more online working and more working from home, and we may well see new businesses come in to replace old businesses that did not survive the pandemic to deliver the new services that will support new ways of working and perhaps new ways of living. People will live further away from town centres. What new opportunities will there be in suburban constituencies such as mine, and even rural constituencies, to deliver services for people who would not previously have spent as much time there? So this is an interesting time, but I believe the Government should, above all, be prioritising economic growth and most particularly employment at this stage.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What assessment has the hon. Lady made of the cost to the Exchequer of her new clause?

Sarah Olney: I have not made an assessment of the cost, but that is partly because it would be difficult to manage that against the extent to which my proposal could, as I said just a minute ago, stimulate the economy, which is what we should prioritise at this time, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises. If we can, we should stimulate SME growth, particularly in new sectors that may well benefit from changes in the way we do business in this country. The hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) commented in particular on businesses that pursue carbon-free ways to deliver goods and services, which are such a priority. These are big areas for growth and we should be pursuing them.

In particular, we should support employment in new industries. In the past few weeks we have seen a great deal about skills shortages. We really need to improve skills development in existing industries—we have seen massive skills shortages in respect of drivers of heavy goods vehicle and care workers—but there are also lots of opportunities in the new industries and particularly in the green economy. We really need to support employment and encourage people to develop the skills they need to take their place in what I think will be the new, future economy.

Mike Wood *rose*—

Sarah Olney: I would like to make some progress, if that is okay.

We should at this time pursue economic growth and job creation above all other concerns, because we face an uncertain few months in our economy. We could face a wave of closures and redundancies as the various support schemes that the Government introduced to get us through the pandemic come to an end. There could well be lots of redundancies as the furlough scheme closes. Business rates exemptions and deferred VAT payments are coming to an end, so if we can reduce the pressure on businesses by relieving them of some of their national insurance payments, that will help them to ride out the coming period when they will need to repay some of the costs. VAT on hospitality is going back to 12.5% from the end of this month. All such financial pressures are coming at a time when we think prices will rise and the universal credit cut may well hit household incomes and suppress demand.

I propose new clause 4 because instead of a selected NICs cut for companies in freeports, I would prefer that we target the cut at SMEs, at this urgent time when we want to stimulate economic growth and support employment.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on Report on behalf of the Opposition. As we have made clear throughout the passage of this legislation through the House, we will not oppose the Bill. We have, however, used the opportunity of the debates we have had so far to raise important questions with Ministers about some of the approaches they have decided to take.

As we know, clauses 1 to 5 introduce a new zero rate of secondary class 1 national insurance contributions for employers who take on employees in a freeport. The zero rate will apply from April 2022 and allow employers to claim relief on the earnings of eligible employees of up to £25,000 per year for three years. Clauses 6 and 7 also introduce a new zero rate of secondary class 1 national insurance contributions, in this case for employers of armed forces veterans.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. It is important to address the amendments before the House at this point. We will have the Third Reading debate later.

James Murray: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall briefly address the amendments we have been discussing as they relate to veterans' employers' national insurance relief. As we made clear on Second Reading and in Committee, this is a vital issue. Veterans deserve the Government's full support as they seek civilian

employment after their service to our country. The Minister may remember that on Second Reading and in Committee I asked him and his colleagues to explain why the employers' relief for veterans is for 12 months—much less than the three years of relief for employers in freeports that the Bill also introduces.

Mike Wood: I wonder whether the shadow Minister could help me: which amendment is he currently speaking to that addresses employers' relief for veterans?

James Murray: If the House would rather I did not address the issue of veterans' employers' relief, I am happy to move on, but it is an important one to address. I would welcome your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We are considering just the amendments before the House. You will have an opportunity to talk much more widely on the whole Bill when we come to Third Reading, which will follow immediately after the votes.

James Murray: Thank you for that clarification, Mr Deputy Speaker. In that case, let me decide where in my speech to pick up. Forgive me for the slight procedural difficulty—if it is okay, I shall reserve my right to speak later.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): I am sorry that the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) was not able to revisit his greatest hits from Committee or other previous stages of the Bill, but unfortunately he is required to speak to the new clauses and amendments before us, which is what I will do.

The Scottish National party has tabled new clauses that would create a new zero rate of secondary class 1 NICs for employers classed as “green manufacturing companies”, including those that produce wind turbines and electric vehicles. As the House will know, the Government take support for the green economy extremely seriously. For example, since 2013 the Government have provided £150 million per annum to the Aerospace Technology Institute—investment match-funded by industry—including £84.6 million of investment to develop zero-emission flights and further support for other potential zero-emission aircraft concepts.

In addition, the Government are to spend nearly £500 million in the next four years to support the UK's electric vehicle manufacturing industry as part of our commitment to provide up to £1 billion for the development and mass production of electric vehicle batteries and the associated supply chains. The funding is available UK-wide and will boost investment in the UK's strong manufacturing base.

Of course, the Government have also stated their ambition to deploy 40 GW of offshore wind capacity by 2030, alongside a commitment to invest £160 million in ports and manufacturing infrastructure. The goal of that investment will be to encourage up to £20 billion of much-needed private investment in coastal areas and to support up to 60,000 green manufacturing jobs by 2030. The Government's commitment to support green manufacturing is therefore quite clear.

Unfortunately, new clause 1 would introduce a major change to the tax system of a magnitude that would require the careful consideration of costs and benefits

[Jesse Norman]

and, in fact, goes far beyond what should be included via amendment in a Bill such as this one. The design of a sector-focused tax relief is not straightforward and would add complexity to the tax system. By contrast, there has been no consultation on, costing of or impact assessment made in relation to the measure proposed in new clause 1. For those reasons, I urge the House to reject it.

On new clause 3, covid-19 has proven to be the biggest health and economic threat faced by the UK in decades. Key workers, including NHS staff and social care workers, have done extraordinary things, as the House recognises, to keep the public safe in the continuing fight against the virus. For their part, the Government hugely value and appreciate such important contributions to the covid-19 response. However, as I will explain, the Government do not believe that the new clause is appropriate or necessary. Under long-standing rules, any payments made in connection with an employment incur income tax and national insurance contributions. Such payments also count as income for the purposes of calculating entitlement to certain benefits.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, we have done something just a wee bit different. It is a £500 bonus, and if the 20% of tax and the national insurance at 12% are added in, that means that the Northern Ireland Executive is paying £735 per individual. Is the Minister aware of that, and would he replicate it in the rest of the UK?

Jesse Norman: I think the hon. Gentleman knows that the £500 payment has been offered across devolved Administrations. It is important that he has made that point, and I recognise it, but that does not really affect the point at issue in relation to the new clause, which is about the £500 payments that the Scottish Government are making to health and social care workers, which they are using to function as a top-up to wages. We therefore consider that these payments are taxable as earnings under the normal rules.

7.30 pm

I will also, if I may, highlight the fact that the UK Government have provided more than £5.9 billion of additional funding for the Scottish Government this year through the Barnett formula. If the Scottish Government had intended health and social care workers to benefit by at least £500, they were entirely free to gross up the payments perhaps to £735, as has been done in Wales, in order to take into account the tax and NICs liabilities. Indeed, the Scottish Government remain able to do so if they really believe that the higher figure is appropriate.

New clause 4 has been proposed by the Liberal Democrats and would increase the employment allowance from £4,000 to £16,000 for two years and would also require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to lay before Parliament a review of the effect of this policy on employment, on the performance of small businesses, and on GDP growth by September 2023. Very surprisingly for a Liberal Democrat amendment, there is no mention on how this increase would be paid for. Such a policy change would be expensive and unnecessary. The

Government have already taken significant actions to support small businesses through the employment allowance in its current form. In fact, businesses and charities up and down this country have benefited from the allowance since it was introduced in 2014. As a result, more than 1 million employers are reducing their annual national insurance contributions bills, and around 650,000 have been taken out of NICs altogether.

The new clause talks about further increasing the allowance. On that point, let me remind the House that the Government only recently raised the allowance from £3,000 to £4,000 in April of last year in order to help small businesses and boost employment levels. Members should also not forget the NICs reliefs that have been included elsewhere in this Bill. There is also the question of affordability. The current cost of the employment allowance is estimated to stand at around £2.3 billion a year. There is significant support for businesses within the NICs system already. Increasing the employment allowance in this way would be an extremely costly use of taxpayers' money and, again, a measure wholly out of keeping with the Report stage of this Bill, let alone that it is not consulted on, costed, or accompanied by any impact assessment. For all those reasons, the new clause should be resisted.

The SNP has already tabled amendments, but not spoken to them, in respect of clause 2, which places additional eligibility criteria on freeports in relation to employment rights, equalities and the environment. [Interruption.] I am sorry, the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) has spoken to them. These criteria would add complexity and potential delay. By singling out freeports for these measures, they would also be burdening an important source of business growth. Let us take greenhouse gas emissions for example. The Government are already committed to reducing carbon emissions. That is why this country became the first major economy to implement a legally binding net zero greenhouse gas emissions target by 2050. That target is reflected in the UK's high regulatory standards—standards that apply across the economy including for businesses operating in freeports. Indeed, the bidding prospectus for freeports in England embedded net zero ambitions as part of the assessment of bids.

As regards amendment 1 on the living wage, the Government are already committed to supporting that in employment, which is precisely why they introduced the national living wage in 2016. It is of course vital to ensure that no goods passing through freeports are the product of slave labour. Slavery is a global problem, which is why employers in freeports will need to meet the same high regulatory standards on slave labour as other businesses in the UK. For all these reasons, I urge the House to resist this amendment.

Finally, I turn to Government amendment 3. The policy intent here is that the veterans' measure should apply to the whole United Kingdom. This amendment corrects a small drafting error by replacing reference to the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992 with a reference to that Act and the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992, reflecting the original policy intent. I trust that Members will agree that this is a minor and technical amendment and should be included as part of the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Mr Thomson, do you intend to withdraw new clause 1?

Richard Thomson: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 4

EMPLOYMENT ALLOWANCE FOR NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS

“(1) In section 1(2)(a)(1) of the National Insurance Contributions Act 2014 (employment allowance for national insurance contributions), for “£4,000” substitute “£16,000”.

(2) The provisions of subsection (1) will remain in force until 30 September 2023 and will then expire unless continued in force by an order under subsection (3).

(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer may by order made by statutory instrument provide that the provisions which are in force will continue in force for a period not exceeding two years from the coming into operation of the order.

(4) No order will be made under subsection (3) unless a draft of the order has been laid before and approved by a resolution of both Houses of Parliament.

(5) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before Parliament a review of the effects of the provisions in subsection (1) on employment, the performance of small businesses and GDP growth no later than 30 September 2023.”—(*Sarah Olney.*)

This new clause would quadruple the employment allowance from £4,000 to £16,000 for two years. At the end of the period, the Chancellor of the Exchequer would be required to assess its effects and would be able to seek parliamentary approval for the policy to continue for up to a further two years.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 15, Noes 309.

Division No. 59]

[7.34 pm

AYES

Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cooper, Daisy
Davey, rh Ed
Edwards, Jonathan
Farry, Stephen
Green, Sarah
Jardine, Christine
Lake, Ben
Lucas, Caroline

Moran, Layla
Olney, Sarah
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Stone, Jamie
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Wera Hobhouse and
Tim Farron**

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Barclay, rh Steve
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron

Benton, Scott
Berry, rh Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Brokenshire, rh James
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Burghart, Alex

Burns, rh Conor
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo

Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Kate
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyns, Andrea
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, Julian
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia

Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob

Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:

**David Rutley and
 Scott Mann**

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): It is good to get the voting back to normal, isn't it? [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] We have missed it.

Clause 6

**ZERO-RATE CONTRIBUTIONS FOR ARMED FORCES
 VETERANS**

Amendment made: 3, page 4, line 25, leave out "the 1992 Act" and insert

"whichever of the 1992 Acts would otherwise apply".—(*Jesse Norman.*)

This amendment corrects an error by replacing a reference to the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992 with a reference to that Act and the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992.

Third Reading

7.48 pm

Jesse Norman: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I must say that I too am delighted that this Bill has been the occasion for our return to proper voting procedures in this House.

I am very grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members who have participated in the passage of this legislation, particularly in Committee. I also thank the Committee's Chairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) and the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), for helping the Committee to take the Bill through its scrutiny so effectively.

I begin by reminding the House of the Bill's provisions and overarching goals. It contains four measures: an employer NICs relief for employees in freeports; an employer NICs relief for employers of veterans; an exemption for Test and Trace support payments from self-employed NICs; and changes to disclosure of tax avoidance schemes legislation with regard to NICs. In addition to those measures, the Government tabled a minor technical amendment to ensure that the policy intent is met in the Bill.

As you will be aware from your intimate scrutiny of the Bill, Mr Deputy Speaker, the employer NICs relief applies to employees in freeports. The measure will support the delivery of the Government's freeports programme. In so doing, it will help to attract new businesses to freeports and regenerate communities by creating jobs, boosting investment and spreading prosperity. It is the Government's intention to designate freeports in all four devolved nations. Therefore, while the legislation currently provides for a relief in England, Wales and Scotland, it is the Government's intention to legislate for this relief in Northern Ireland as soon as it is practicable. In fact, the Bill gives the Government the power to set out the detail of the employer NICs relief in Northern Ireland in secondary legislation once engagement with the Northern Ireland Executive is complete.

Secondly, the Bill contains an employer NICs relief for employers of veterans. I do not need to tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that our veterans provide an extraordinary national service, as recent events have reminded us, but we know that some of them face difficulties in obtaining secure and fulfilling employment. It is only right that we do all we can to change this situation. This measure provides full employer NICs relief on earnings up to £50,270 in a veteran's first full year of civilian employment.

It amounts to a saving of up to £5,500 per hired veteran and it will constitute a real boost to their employment prospects.

Thirdly, there is the exemption for test and trace support payments for self-employed NICs. As Members will recall, and as we have recapitulated already, last September the Government announced a £500 support payment for low-income individuals told to self-isolate but who could not work from home and would lose income as a result. Shortly afterwards, the Scottish and Welsh Governments announced similar schemes. Last year we introduced regulations to exempt payments under support schemes from employee and employer class 1 and class 1A NICs. This Bill will extend the exemption to the self-employed. It will ensure that these workers are treated consistently with their employed counterparts and that they do not have to pay NICs on support payments. It will retrospectively exempt test and trace support payments from class 2 and class 4 NICs to the 2021-22 tax year and it will ensure that in future these test and trace support payments will not be included in profits liable to class 2 and class 4 NICs.

Finally, the Bill includes a measure that makes changes to the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes regime for NICs. Legislation in the Finance Act 2021 enhanced the operation of the DOTAS regime, and the Bill includes changes to an existing regulation-making power in the Social Security Administration Act 1992. This will ensure that HMRC can act decisively when promoters fail to provide information on suspected avoidance schemes. It will also enable HMRC to warn taxpayers about suspected avoidance schemes at an earlier stage than at present.

As I have outlined, this Bill contains a range of relatively small yet significant measures that will advance this Government's policy objectives. It supports the levelling-up agenda and regional growth, it boosts the prospects of our armed services veterans, and it strengthens the Government's powers to tackle promoters of avoidance schemes. I reiterate my very strong and sincere thanks to Members who have engaged in the series of stimulating discussions and debates that we have had on these measures over the past few weeks. On that note, I commend the Bill to the House.

7.52 pm

James Murray: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this Bill's Third Reading on behalf of the Opposition. As I have made clear several times, we are not going to oppose the Bill, but we have used the various debates on it to raise important questions about some of the approaches that Ministers have decided to take. I would like to use the opportunity of Third Reading to reiterate some of the sticking points where we do not feel that we have had enough clarity.

I spoke earlier about clauses 1 to 5 and then moved on to discuss clauses 6 and 7, which introduce a new zero rate of secondary class 1 national insurance contributions for the employers of armed forces veterans. As I made clear on Second Reading and in Committee, we believe that this is a vital issue. Veterans deserve the Government's full support as they seek civilian employment after their service to our country. Other Members may remember that both on Second Reading and in Committee I asked the Minister and his colleagues to explain why the employers' relief for veterans is for 12 months—much less than the relief for employers in freeports, also introduced by the Bill, which is three years.

In Committee, I made it clear that I felt that the Exchequer Secretary's response during Second Reading had failed to address my question about why the Government had chosen to make veterans' employers' relief available for only one year. The Financial Secretary responded by expanding on the Government's position. In relation to the relief for freeport employers, he said that the intention was

“to create circumstances in which they can have long-term secure employment, in particular with all the employment rights that come with more durable employment.”—[*Official Report, National Insurance Contributions Public Bill Committee, 22 June 2021; c. 18.*]

At another point in Committee, the Minister said about the Government's plans for freeport employers:

“The way in which this measure has been structured is focused towards longer-term employment, as the relief runs for three years...From that point of view, it reflects a commitment by the Government to create high-quality and stable longer-term employment.”—[*Official Report, National Insurance Contributions Public Bill Committee, 22 June 2021; c. 6.*]

What my colleagues and I find hard to understand is why the Government, despite what the Minister has said throughout the passage of the Bill, do not seem to want to design a system for veterans that both supports transition into civilian life and, at the same time, like the scheme in freeports, seeks to create long-term employment with employment rights.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I am sorry that I was not party to those discussions, but perhaps I can contribute as an ex-serviceman and a former armed services Minister. It is in the first 12 months out of the armed forces when a serviceman finds themselves in a completely different arena. I understand this. In my first six months, I re-joined the armed forces because I could not settle and I could not find the right sort of employment. That was the sort of help our veterans needed then and that is exactly what this part of the Bill does today.

James Murray: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for adding to the debate. I certainly recognise what he says about the importance of supporting veterans into civilian employment in the first six months and the first year. The question from the Opposition to which we did not have a satisfactory response is why, in addition to that, there is not a consideration or an option of support for long-term durable employment with employment rights. As that point was made several times by the Minister in relation to the relief for employers in freeports, why does the same support for longer-term employment not apply to veterans as well?

During discussions in Committee, the Minister pointed to a consultation with interested parties about how to design the scheme and mentioned how different parties had been “well sighted” on the options, so I looked at the Government's consultation to understand what different parties had said. I was expecting to see questions about the length of the relief and whether 12 months or longer would be appropriate, but all I could find was a statement saying:

“The Government has announced that this relief will be available for the first 12 months of a veteran's civilian employment.”

There did not seem to be any option or question about whether a longer relief would be appropriate.

[James Murray]

Moving on to other measures we debated during the passage of the Bill, clause 10 provides a national insurance contributions exemption for payments made under a self-isolation support scheme. As we have heard, that ensures that these payments are not taken into account for the purposes of computing profits liable to class 4 NICs or for the purposes of class 2 NICs. As I set out on Second Reading and in Committee, we welcome this exemption from national insurance contributions for payments made under a self-isolation support scheme. It is crucial that people who need support to self-isolate receive it, so we welcome any steps that make the system for self-isolation payments more effective and less subject to administrative burden.

The Minister may recall that during the debate in Committee there was a brief discussion about why the exemption for class 2 and class 4 contributions was not implemented earlier. We discussed the comments that the Exchequer Secretary made on that point on Second Reading, and in Committee I asked the Minister to confirm exactly when the Treasury announced, by way of ministerial statement or other appropriate means, that the exemption for national insurance contributions would be extended to class 2 and class 4 contributions for payments made under a self-isolation support scheme. The Minister responded by saying:

“I do not have the date that he describes at hand, and I am happy to write to him on that.”—[*Official Report, National Insurance Contributions Public Bill Committee, 22 June 2021; c. 22.*]

I am sure he will forgive me if I have missed his letter on this matter, but my office and I cannot find a record of its having been received, so perhaps he could write to me this week, for the first time or again, to confirm that point.

We also debated clause 11, which widens existing regulation-making powers so that regulations can be made for national insurance to mirror the amendments to the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes procedures—DOTAS—that are included in the Finance Act 2021. As I made clear in earlier debates, we welcome any measures that help HMRC to tackle tax avoidance. In earlier debates I also took the opportunity to draw Ministers’ attention to a point made by the Chartered Institute of Taxation: that it believes there is a hard core of between 20 and 30 promoters of tax avoidance schemes, identified by HMRC, who clearly do not play by the rules. I asked the Minister whether he recognised this number, and, as he may recall, welcomed his confirmation that HMRC recognises the number of 20 to 30 hardcore promoters. He said, however, that he did

“not think that it would be prudent to make an estimate or assessment of what the appropriate number of promoters is or could be.”

It is therefore important that we have a better understanding of what progress we have actually made. The Minister said that

“over the past six years, more than 20 promoters have left the market.”—[*Official Report, National Insurance Contributions Public Bill Committee, 22 June 2021; c. 24.*]

However, he did not sign up to a commitment or a target for the coming years. I would welcome him writing to me in the coming days to explain what the number of hardcore promoters was six years ago, so that I can understand whether those who have left the market have been replaced by new promoters.

Finally, to conclude—I am very conscious, Mr Deputy Speaker, of your and Madam Deputy Speaker’s steer about what not to focus on in this debate—it is frustrating to rely only on newspaper briefings to know what is going on. I had hoped, as the Treasury Minister is the first to address the House of Commons since we first heard that the Government might be considering a national insurance rise, that we could have heard the position from him directly today. I leave the thought in his head that we would like to know why the Government’s plan for social care is one that hits hardest low earners, young people and businesses creating new jobs.

8 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): On Third Reading, allow me to place on record, as I believe is customary, my grateful thanks to the Clerks for their support throughout and my thanks to my party’s researchers, Scott Taylor and, in particular, Salma Saade, for the assistance they have given me throughout the passage and scrutiny of this Bill.

This Bill could have done a great deal more, and we regret very much that it does not. There is some irony, as the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) said from the Opposition Front Bench, that while there is a discussion raging outside this House about national insurance, that is not what we have been touching on in the debate this evening. We should recognise that national insurance is a tax that affects the young and the lowest paid disproportionately. Exemptions that are targeted effectively, as I have tried to draw out through the passage of the Bill, can achieve much, but blanket increases simply increase and exacerbate existing inequalities in our society. It is not a burden for the Minister to carry solely by himself, but I hope very much that in the coming hours and days the Government will reflect carefully on that.

In drawing my remarks to a close, I thank the Minister for his engagement throughout. I hope that that engagement continues with the Scottish Government as we proceed to deliver the outcomes that this Bill on its own perhaps now will not.

8.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I put on record my thanks to the Minister and the Government for bringing forward the Bill. It is good to see the finished article. On behalf of my party, and given where we stand and what we want to put forward, may I say that we were very happy to support the Government tonight.

I will make a couple of very quick comments. The Minister and I had an exchange earlier about new clause 3, but I was dismayed and shocked to hear from a Marie Curie nurse that her covid thanks package was subject to tax and national insurance. The central office was administering that in Scotland. In Northern Ireland, we understood that the bonus was an income, yet the Northern Ireland Executive made the decision to make payments of up to £735 an individual. That meant that those who qualify for the full award, which many do, pay tax at 20% and national insurance at 12% and still receive approximately £500 in their pay packet at the end of the month. We very clearly made that decision, and I think the Government have recognised that, because it is a recognition that these public service staff deserve a substantial boost and need it.

I very much welcome the Minister's comments about freeports. I know that the final decision lies with the Northern Ireland Assembly, and he has referred to that already. I very much look forward to us in Northern Ireland playing our part and taking advantage of what the Government have brought forward here tonight.

The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) was right in his intervention that the first 12 months for any veteran are really important, because that is the time they need support most. I am therefore very pleased to see that measure. I also welcome the Minister's decision to ensure that there is no ambiguity with regard to the Northern Ireland aspect of the Bill, as amendment 3 replaces a reference to the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992 with a reference to that Act and the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992.

As I highlighted in my previous contribution on the Bill, it seems that we have to remind Europe almost daily in this House that Northern Ireland is an integral part of the UK. It is determined to treat us as a third nation when it suits for duty free and taxation, but not when it does not suit for representation and European healthcare. If I may, Mr Deputy Speaker, I put on record that this week, my party leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) will be making a major statement on this issue. I hope that the Government will take note of what we are doing and what we are saying, because it has some effect on the future and where we are in relation to the Northern Ireland protocol.

I believe that the capacity is here to work together for all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is always my hope that we do that, and I hope that that is what the Minister has put forward today will do. I look forward to working with the Minister through the Northern Ireland Assembly if that is possible and if it is still in place. We will wait to see what happens.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

PENSIONS

That the draft Pensions Regulator (Employer Resources Test) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 28 June, be approved.—(*Alan Mak.*) *Question agreed to.*

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

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Environmental Authorisations (Scotland) Regulations 2018 (Consequential Modifications) Order 2021, which were laid before this House on 8 June, be approved.—(*Alan Mak.*)

Question agreed to.

Medicinal Cannabis

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Alan Mak.)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have had a number of indications from Members who now wish to speak in this debate. As we have finished the main business early, we are able to facilitate that, but I ask Members please to stand and indicate that they wish to speak. They will be called in at least the order that people have come up to me in the Chair.

8.6 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is in some ways a pleasure to speak in this debate, but in others it is a huge disappointment that we are still debating this issue years after we thought it was in fact settled. I go back in this issue to my first face-to-face meeting with my constituent, Karen Gray. It was in London, curiously—not Edinburgh—in the pouring rain. We were meeting to hand in a petition to Downing Street calling for the legalisation of medicinal cannabis. I had been in touch with Karen and her son, Murray, before that day and was aware that Murray had a rare form of epilepsy that was blighting his childhood, with multiple seizures, hospital admissions and missed school days; his parents feared for his life.

Since then, my team in the constituency have experienced all the ups and downs of the journey with Murray and Karen—the hope, the frustration and the disappointment, but always, always optimism that the medication that he needs will be there and available on the NHS. We thought the job was done in November 2018 when, after a powerful public campaign in which the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) played a pivotal role as a Health Minister, the then Home Secretary, now Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) made medicinal cannabis oil—the substance on which so many were pinning their hopes—legal.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will elaborate later in a speech, but the crucial thing about when the law was changed was that it was about the prescribed medical use of cannabis oil by a specialist consultant, not a GP. It was not about a spliff behind the bike sheds or anything like that; it was prescribed medical use that saved children's lives. I agree with the hon. Lady that it is a disgrace we are still here today, debating it.

Christine Jardine: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I share his frustration and annoyance. The measure was specifically designed in the way that it was, and it had the support of the Government at the time. The Home Secretary, the Prime Minister and the whole Department for Health team were behind this move, which we thought would change so many children's lives. Sadly, the job was not completely done, because Murray is still unable to access that life-changing treatment on the NHS. His family have to find the money themselves every month. It is not just Murray; it is not just about his case and his life; it is not a one-off. I stand here tonight for him, and also for all those who know exactly what that feels like.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for access to medical cannabis under prescription, having taken over from my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning). One of my constituents, Maya, is nine years old and has a rare form of epilepsy. Her family are having to pay up to £2,000 a month for medical cannabis, despite the revisions of the guidance. I thank the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who is in her place, for the good work she has already done, and I am very grateful for the correspondence that she and I have exchanged, but does the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) agree that the Government can do much more, particularly on liaising with clinical commissioning groups to get this medicinal cannabis to the children who need it?

Christine Jardine: I thank the hon. Member for making an excellent point. The APPG has done astonishing work over the past few years in support of this, but yes, the Government could do so much more for those families who know what it is like to get to the end of every month, and of every prescription, and face the huge bills of which he spoke—up to £2,000 a month. The strain and financial burden of that is all on the families. Surely that is not how any of us in this place anticipated it would be or wanted it to be.

When the then Home Secretary agreed that medicinal cannabis would be legal for use in the United Kingdom, I think we all believed that parents would no longer be forced to watch their children suffer, knowing that a treatment was available. What has happened since is heartbreaking. In the intervening years, they have been forced to source medication themselves, sometimes travel abroad—again at huge cost—to collect it, challenge the medical authorities and face rejection and repeated appeals for NHS prescriptions.

Surely no one in this place wants even to contemplate what it would mean to have a loved one—husband, wife, partner, brother, sister, friend or child—who had to pay for the medication they needed simply to go on with day-to-day life. Think of the diabetic without insulin or the asthmatic without an inhaler; this is no different, but it is new. With so much red tape and inflexible guidelines, too many people face being left alone, helpless and simply unable to afford life-changing treatment. In fact, since November 2018, just three NHS prescriptions have been issued for the type of medicinal cannabis that is life-transforming for these children.

Clearly, guidelines are not empowering medical professionals to do the job they want to do and provide the best possible care for their patients, knowing that they have the establishment's support. Critics often point to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and say it has restricted medicinal cannabis, but only a few months ago it said that there was no ban and that prescriptions should be done on a case-by-case basis. Still parents are told that the medical profession does not have the confidence to prescribe the medication because of a lack of evidence and that clinical randomised control trials are needed. However, that will not work, because this medication does not come in a standard dosage and the balance of ingredients needs to be

changed to suit individual patients. Even if medical trials did work, they would be of no use to those children who are already benefiting from medicinal cannabis. Trials would be both unethical and unsafe, because those children would have to stop taking the medicine that is working for them, perhaps for a placebo, and risk a return of life-threatening seizures.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for making such a powerful presentation with great passion. Does she share my frustration—I am sure she does—that the debate around medicinal cannabis is often confused with people who just want to smoke dope and drop out? It frustrates me enormously, because people such as Murray, Karen and Jorja are all suffering from life-threatening, debilitating illnesses and we are talking about precise, prescribed medical treatments. Unless we can quickly sort out the authorisation of medical practitioners to continue to prescribe to these existing children and patients, we will be in a very dark place.

Christine Jardine: I could not agree more. We must address that quickly. As the hon. Gentleman said, it should not be mixed up with the scenarios he described; it is often children—adults as well—on a carefully prescribed medication that the Government have supported.

There is also the argument of there being no evidence because of the lack of clinical trials. Well, there is an abundance of observed evidence that medicinal cannabis works, so the clinical trials explanation falls short. There are also those who point to the medicine Epidiolex being available on prescription for two rare forms of childhood epilepsy, but I understand that that is less effective for many sufferers. Scientists say that the medicinal cannabis that these children need is effective for 95% of children.

Alberto Costa: I thank the hon. Member for giving way for a second time. On that point, one thing I have discovered in the debate is the lack of confidence in the medical profession. In fairness to the Government, they do not have a role at all in enforcing the medical profession's prescription of medication. Does she agree that the medical profession ought to listen to her and others in the House tonight, put its shoulder to the wheel and encourage its members to listen to the science and help those children across the country who need the medication badly?

Christine Jardine: The hon. Member makes exactly the point that I would make. I think we all appreciate that the Government do not have the power to make the medical profession do anything, but they can be encouraged to put their shoulder to the wheel and get behind this cause.

Sir Mike Penning: I thank the hon. Lady for being generous. Fortunately, we have time to debate this massively important subject this evening, which is what it deserves. The point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), who co-chairs the all-party parliamentary group that I used to chair, is that specialist medics out there are writing the prescriptions, but they are being blocked and regularly threatened by other senior people in the medical profession. They are told, "Even though you are the expert and that would

save a child's life, if you do this, we will stop you." It is right that it is not a politician's job. The will of the House is very important, as I will come to in my speech, but if the top-expert clinicians are writing prescriptions, some of which are honoured by the NHS—I will also come to that—and they are being blocked by other medics, somebody has to step in and sort the mess out.

Christine Jardine: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. We do have that overwhelming body of observed evidence of the efficacy of cannabis oil. I have seen at first hand the difference that medicinal cannabis has made to Murray Gray's life—it has transformed his life. When his mum, Karen, first came to see me, he was a very unwell wee boy who was, as I mentioned, constantly in and out of hospital with dozens of seizures a day, and his family were worried that they could lose him. Since being prescribed cannabis oil, he is seizure-free and a happy youngster who plays football with his dad. When he came to visit me in my office, he explained everything I have ever need to know about dinosaurs. It was a joy to see him so happy. The medication has given him a life that he may not otherwise have had.

It is time for the Health Secretary—just as he did when he was Home Secretary—and his team to intervene to make the case that the medical profession should put its shoulder to the wheel. It is time to close the huge gulf between what the Government promised—and, I believe, wanted—and what has been delivered.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is the best-placed person to move the debate forward, because he was the one in government in the Home Office who changed the law. Does the hon. Member agree that we need action now?

Christine Jardine: I agree 100% with the hon. Lady that we need action now—it is actually overdue—and that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is the very person who can give us what we need.

Because this is not a political football kicked between party politicians—it never has been and never should be; we have always resisted that—a little over a year ago, more than 100 MPs across the House from the Liberal Democrats, Conservatives, and Labour and Green parties wrote to the former Health Secretary to demand action.

Sir Mike Penning: And the DUP.

Christine Jardine: And the Democratic Unionist party; I do beg your pardon.

Nor is the debate any longer about the proper use or otherwise of cannabis oil. As I have said, the evidence that it is life-changing for those in need is already overwhelming. So it appears that the debate comes down to the willingness of the medical profession. The clock is ticking, however. There are currently only two physicians in this country prescribing the medication, and one of them retires shortly. Add to that the fact that for many families, the Grays included, there will come a time when they cannot afford the medicine their loved ones need and will no longer be able to raise the money. We cannot wait for the creaking bureaucracy of the medical profession to turn.

As we have said, when the current Health Secretary was at the Home Office, he responded to the parents' appeals, listened and made medicinal cannabis legal. Now the ball has once again found its way into his court and he can help, so my appeal is straightforward. I know a little of it personally: I have had a seizure—I have come to and seen the fear and the relief in the eyes of loved ones—and it is terrifying. What it must be like for a child I do not know. Until a more widespread solution for prescribing can be agreed, and it must be, the Government should save these families the pain of paying for prescriptions. Surely, when the quality of life for a child—so many children—is on the line, it is the right thing to do. I have always been optimistic, and I have confidence that I am right to have optimism and belief that this Health Secretary will take this opportunity.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I remind the House that those who were here from the start of the Adjournment debate—they had to be here for the opening speech by Christine Jardine—are able to make standalone speeches, but anybody else who came in after the opening speech can make interventions, and clearly it is up to the person on their feet as to whether they take such an intervention.

8.21 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): As I said earlier, is it not great that we have a couple of hours to debate this subject, which is so important to the family and loved ones of the children who have suffered so much, and we can do something about that? But is it not a crying shame that we have had this debate not just in this Chamber time and again, but in Westminster Hall as well? It was there that I responded to the debate as the police and counter-narcotics Minister, when I actually said on behalf of Her Majesty's Government that the Government were willing to look at the prescribed medical use of cannabis for certain treatments, particularly for seizures in children with the very rare form of epilepsy that some have.

There are myriad other illnesses, which we might get to, that cannabis could help, but this is about the closed mind of some members of the medical profession—these so-called experts who took an oath to protect lives and to protect the human beings they are responsible for—who are blocking other medics. As we just heard, fewer and fewer medics are able to prescribe, frankly because in many cases they have been scared off and threatened, or are now coming close to retirement. So what will these parents do? I ask hon. Members in the House this evening what they would do if they were a parent of one of these children. God forbid.

I remember so well Hannah Deacon bringing Alfie Dingley in to see me. Alfie was having in excess of 100 seizures a week. I think the figure was actually greater than that, but that is the figure that sticks in my head. Every time he had a seizure, Hannah and her husband did not know whether he was going to come through it, because all the other medication they were giving him was not working. We have heard this story from constituents around the country, but if I may, I will just concentrate on Alfie for a second. He was given products off-label that were never designed for children

[Sir Mike Penning]

to try to help him. Doctors were willing to do that with products that were never ever medicated, designed or regulated for children, but because they were off-label, GPs could write a prescription and they did that on the NHS—trying to keep him alive in that way, while in others blocking the help he could have had.

I praise the End Our Pain campaign of Peter Carroll and his team. They have worked tirelessly over the years, and I will give him a name-check because it is very important that people understand that he has never taken a penny for running such campaigns. There is all the media coverage we have had from lots of famous people, but at the end of the day it is his team who have pushed this. There is the bravery of the parents of these children—some out of desperation. But now, as hon. Members will hear in my speech, they want to make sure it does not happen to other families and other children who are desperate to make this change happen.

I made that speech in Westminster Hall with the full permission of the Home Secretary at the time, who then became the Prime Minister—my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May)—and we started that process. The process then progressed because it was nothing to do with the Department of Health at that stage; this was a Home Office matter. I remember going to No. 10 with Alfie, and he was his usual naughty self, which was fabulous because that is how we want our young children to be to experience life. We were due to meet at No. 10 the police Minister at the time and some of the experts, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister came into the room, sat with Alfie and his mum and dad, and talked to them. She said, “We will do something about this: we will change the regulations and the law,” and to her credit, that is exactly what she did. With the help of the Home Secretary, who is now the Health Secretary, we changed the law.

The bit I am so upset about is that if we had not changed the law fully to move this into the Department of Health, other children would be getting the prescription that Alfie and some of the others are getting. They were not given that prescription free on the NHS by the Department of Health; they were actually given it by a committee in the Home Office. We had not moved it across through the legislation, so it was done by that committee, based on evidence that it was going to save the life of this little boy and the lives of subsequent other little boys and girls.

Then we got this impasse. The children got the prescription for free—there are not thousands of children out there; this is a really very rare condition—but when this moved across to the Department of Health, it stopped. They carried on getting their free prescriptions, but even though prescriptions were being written, they could only be written as private prescriptions, and we have heard about the cost of medication for families trying desperately, from all means, to raise the money to get this prescribed medical use of cannabis. There are different types and we could go into the different mechanisms and what is in them, but at the end of the day that is a medical or doctors’ decision, not a politicians’ decision.

Believe it or not, I had to phone the Home Secretary several times and say that there was a family at Stansted airport, at passport and customs control, who were

having the medication taken away from them even though it was perfectly legal in this country to have that product. Parents had raised the money and they went to Holland—most of them went to Holland—and saw the specialist, went to the pharmacist and brought it back, and then had it taken away from them. Believe it or not, when we eventually got the authorities to agree to let them have it, they tried to charge the parents for the transport cost of moving the product back to the family. That is ignorance, a lack of knowledge, but we are beyond all that now.

We are now in this situation for the families. I spoke fairly recently to Hannah Deacon, the mother of Alfie. Alfie is what we would expect a boy of that age to be—he can ride a bike and he can have a relationship with his sister that he has never had before, and vice versa. At times he is a naughty boy; hey, that happens. Is that not what we want for our children? Yet families are still in this limbo situation of having to raise money—beg, borrow, I am not going to use the word “steal”, but all of us in the House this evening know where I am coming from; they have to desperately try to raise money. The Government could use their power to buy this product so the families would not have to pay £2,000 for it; if the Government bought the product it would be vastly cheaper as it would not cost the NHS £2,000 per prescription.

Adam Afriyie: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful and passionate speech, and I thank him for his work in the Home Office and in pushing this through. Does he share my frustration that in many other countries around the world, including Germany, manufacturing is coming up to speed and producing well-defined products that could be exceptionally helpful, but because of the impasse we have here among the medical profession it will prove almost impossible to introduce those products here even though, based on the evidence we have, they are perfectly safe?

Sir Mike Penning: We are not reinventing the wheel, as my hon. Friend says: we started this but are now lagging behind the rest of the world. The product is slightly different—the oil has different forms of THCs in it. The Minister used to be my Parliamentary Private Secretary all those years ago—how the mighty fall, and how the mighty have risen up the greasy ladder—and she is passionate about trying to help on this, but it is not about Epidiolex; it is about the particular product being prescribed actually working, and it is normally to do with the levels of THCs.

I think this problem might be to do with the terrible word “cannabis” that we use in this country. This is not anything to do with cannabis, really; I wish we could invent another name for it and just say “oil with THCs in it”, because that would eradicate much of the fear that there is at present—and it is not just fear, it is dangerous to the argument.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I feel a little sorry for the medical profession, because a slight correction should be made. Fifty years ago in the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 we pretty much classified cannabis as a poison. That is why the medical profession has not felt confident enough to use it, test it and research it; it simply could not. Now we are saying, “You guys have got to catch up

and catch up quick,” and the Government have a role to play in facilitating that. Research is kicking off now, which is great, but although some say the medical profession should have been doing that for all these years, it could not do so because this place stopped it. On the right hon. Gentleman’s last point, let us call it “medical hemp”.

Sir Mike Penning: I completely agree on the medical profession and know exactly where the Home Office stood when I was at the Department. I would love to say that the whole of the Home Office and my civil servants in the narcotics part of it were thrilled by what I said in Westminster Hall all those years ago, but I can assure colleagues that they certainly were not, to say the least; fortunately, I had covered my back with the Home Secretary.

We need to move on from this, however. This is not about reform of the 1971 Act. It is about whether there is a group of children who we know get benefit from this, and whether, as we all know from our constituency postbags, there are other conditions that could also benefit from this type of oil with a THC product in it. That is where we are struggling.

We need to roll back this debate and talk, as I did at the start of my speech, about children—children who deserve the best possible start in life and just happen to have been born with a medical condition that the medical profession, in its infinite and great wisdom, has not quite got an answer for. This product is part of the answer, although it only alleviates the condition. As parents have said to me on many occasions, it does not take away the condition but it does let the children live a life as close to normality as possible; it is not normal, because it involves dropping oil on a little boy or girl’s tongue on a daily basis, but it is as normal as we can get.

Tonia Antoniazzi: It was a pleasure to serve with the right hon. Gentleman as co-chair of the all-party group on medical cannabis under prescription. On the point he makes about children, we have Bailey Williams in Cardiff, a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), and that case highlights that these children are no longer classified as children after four years; they become adults. Bailey Williams is now 18, and the question arises of how things will change for him in a different health system with different rights. What would the right hon. Gentleman say on that?

Sir Mike Penning: The hon. Lady was a brilliant co-chair with me for all those years; we agreed on most things even though there is a tiny number of things we do not agree on. The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I have a constituent who has now turned 18, although it is not the THC but another medical component that particularly helps her. People come out of the care of one part of the health service and there is a little bit of a transition period but there is very little research on the evidential base going forward, and we need to do that research.

Let me touch for a second on what has been said to me by senior medical people in the Department of Health and Social Care. They said, “We need to do trials, Mike. We need to use placebos. We need to find out whether this actually works or whether it doesn’t

work.” What parent on this planet is going to take their child off a medication that actually works, with the risk that they may get a placebo, have a seizure and die? Is that where we are in the 21st century, really and truly?

We had a statement earlier from the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). We are a world leader in doing medical things. We have done things in this country around the vaccines that no one dreamed possible, yet we are talking about giving placebos—and those people were very serious, too. I cannot repeat some of the comments I got from some of the parents, but they quite rightly said—I will speak politely on their behalf—“Not in a million years.” Let us put it in those terms.

I know that the Minister will do her level best, but this is not about the Government taking over Epidiolex. Yes, they need to pay for research—I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) about that—and research in this area could change the whole way that pain is addressed and perhaps get us away from using so many opioids, but this is actually just about having trust in the expert who has written the prescription for a child who may well die if he does not get that oil with the THC component on prescription.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I am sorry for intervening on the right hon. Gentleman again. The NHS keeps asking experts, but those experts are not experts in medical cannabis; they are experts in the condition of epilepsy but have no insight into that. Where is the foresight and vision to help these children with intractable epilepsy?

Sir Mike Penning: I alluded earlier to the narrow-mindedness of people who have taken an oath to protect people and protect children. No one, I would have thought, goes into the medical profession to hurt people, but at the end of the day, we have a group of children—not thousands, but a small group—whose parents are crying out, “Please listen to my specialist. Please listen to me, as a parent trying to save my child’s life.”

Alberto Costa: I thank my right hon. Friend for the good work that he did as my predecessor on the APPG. Does he agree that, given that there is such a small number of children across the country who suffer from severe forms of epilepsy, a temporary measure would be for the Government to be bold and simply cover the cost of private prescriptions until we develop the proper framework, along with the science that demonstrates conclusively the efficacy of this medicine?

Sir Mike Penning: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more strongly. That was what we did in the Home Office, which is why Alfie and some of the other children got their prescriptions paid for by the NHS. We set the committee up and we did it. I say again that I feel personally guilty, because we worked in all good faith to get the issue across to the Department of Health and it still has it, and those parents feel guilty, because they feel that other children should be having the benefits that Alfie is getting.

Surely, given the will of this House, the will of the Government, the will of previous Prime Ministers, the cross-party support, the fact that the previous Health Secretary came and met the parents here in the House

[Sir Mike Penning]

and made them a commitment, and the fact that the Home Secretary who changed the legislation is now the Health Secretary, it must be a no-brainer. Let us look after these kids.

8.38 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on bringing this debate forward, and it is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning). He is a man who speaks with great passion for what he believes in, and I have been very fortunate to be able to support him in bringing this issue forward.

I rise to speak about one of my constituents. Darren and Danielle are the parents of little Sophia. I have absolutely no doubt that the reason why Sophia has improved so fantastically, way beyond what we ever hoped, is because of medicinal cannabis. Parents, as parents do, speak for their children and want the best for them. I brought Danielle over here and we met the previous Health Minister, who heard her story for the first time. As a result of hearing that story, he did his best to help us move forward to the next stage. A lot of people have helped. We would never have done any of these things without myriad people, including the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead and his friends and colleagues. Sophia is a lovely bright wee girl whose life was a litany of multiple seizures. She is a different girl today because of medicinal cannabis. I am very clear about what I want to see in relation to medicinal cannabis. I see its specific benefit for young people.

I am very fortunate to be a member of many organisations back home. One is the Royal Black Preceptory, and who were there at the side of the road in Newtownards on the last Saturday in August but Sophia, Danielle and Darren? That wee girl, who I had not seen for ages—for a couple of years at least, because of covid—was at the side of the road and she was as bright as a bean. Her mum and dad were pointing me out in the parade so they could say thank you for all we had done. Honestly, what did we do? All we did, really, was what any parent would do for their child, and that is what it is all about.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for pointing out just what it means to families to have this opportunity. In my own constituency, Cole Thompson and his mother Lisa Quarrell have really fought and campaigned to pay for this medication. Aside from the financial costs, I hope he agrees that we must also recognise the psychological stress and turmoil we are continually putting these families through month after month after month. It really is incumbent on the Government to address that, because it is simply not fair: it is not fair on the children and it is not fair on the families.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. That is exactly how I feel, and I think it is exactly how we all feel as elected representatives on behalf of our constituents. I can well recall the bad old days of the pressure that was on the family: the pressure on the parents, the pressure on the child and the pressure on

their friends, with all the multiple issues they had to address. There is an evidential base. It is as clear as a bell. I can see it in that wee girl Sophia. I can see it in the improvement that she has quite clearly made. That is why I totally support this product. I believe the evidential base is overwhelming. I can vouch for that, as I see that lovely wee girl and the improvements she has had.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) sent me a letter, which I will record for *Hansard* if I can, written by his constituent, a fellow called Robin Emerson, whose daughter is a wee girl called Jorja. There is also an evidential base in her improvement. My hon. Friend very kindly gave me a copy of the letter last week, which refers to

“an important intervention to enable a number of children suffering with epilepsy to receive a treatment containing Cannabidiol (CBD) and Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). This has made a crucial difference to their quality of life over the past two years”.

In some cases, quite honestly Mr Speaker, I believe they save lives. They definitely do. In my heart I believe that, which is why I am here tonight to speak on this matter. I feel it is so important.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way on that point. Does he agree that there is no other medical intervention suitable for these children? It is intractable epilepsy. Nothing else has been found to give them that quality of life. Does he agree that we have to move forward in this debate?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: we do have to move forward, and that is the message from us all in the Chamber tonight. I know that Robin, on behalf of Jorja, and Darren and Danielle, on behalf of Sophia, tried almost every other thing that they could before they came to medicinal cannabis, and they have seen the difference almost right away.

Sir Mike Penning: I am sorry to come back in because I did speak at length, Mr Deputy Speaker. Some of the medics have tried all the other medications. Many of those, as I alluded to in my speech, are completely off-label, were never intended for this and have not worked, but they are willing to block the medical use of cannabis oil with THCs. Why?

Jim Shannon: I bow to the expertise of the right hon. Gentleman and I wholeheartedly agree with him.

We need the Government and the Minister tonight to give us an assurance that they will cover the prescription beyond September. The letter I referred to asked the Government

“to clarify the guidance which enables children...to continue to receive this vital treatment”

via their GP

“under guidance from a specialist and funded by the NHS.”

The clinical trial for a treatment manufactured by MGC Pharma, which is due to begin in the autumn, was also referred to. Until that happens and until those trials are completed, we really need to recognise the proof that each of us as MPs have, on behalf of our constituents, and confirm that medicinal cannabis improves quality of life.

I also want to mention my sister and her son, Jake. Jake never had medicinal cannabis when he was young. I wish he did, because I tell you what: I can see the

improvement that he would have had at a very early stage, which he does not have today because of all those years of epileptic fits. It grieves me greatly to realise that the opportunity that Sophia and Jorja had was something that wee Jake did not. If we had had that years ago, perhaps his improvement would have been much greater.

I support the hon. Member for Edinburgh West tonight and the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead and everyone else who will speak afterwards, including in interventions—I thank all those who have intervened. We are all united tonight on retaining medicinal cannabis for our constituents. We as MPs, on behalf of these parents and children, can see the evidential base, and what an evidential base it is. We always say, “Let’s have the evidence.” Well, we have the evidence. We have it individually and on behalf of those families, and tonight, I look to our Minister to give us the reassurance that we need on behalf of our constituents back home.

8.47 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing the debate and on her brilliant timing in doing so on an evening where we can debate not only the narrow issue being focused on by the wonderful campaign End Our Pain—the plight of these epileptic children. I do not have one of those children in my constituency, but a number of us do, and by goodness, if I did, I absolutely would be championing their cause. However, this discussion also needs to take place in the context of the whole debate about medicine and how we need to improve our nation’s and people’s access to medicines that work.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) was behind me on the day that I asked the urgent question that followed the march and the petition that we presented to Downing Street. It was when he leaned over to me in the Chamber and said, “We don’t agree about very much, Crispin, but I support you on this,” that I realised that what I would have regarded as the Taliban, as far as drugs policy was concerned, had come on side. With enthusiasm, we embraced my right hon. Friend’s help because of his influence with the Prime Minister. Having worked with him, I will not disguise the fact that we come from a very different place on wider drugs policy; he managed to get me a splash in *The Sun* when he was taking the Psychoactive Substances Bill through the House, which was my moment of notoriety in the Chamber. However, the context of what we are considering today is a drugs policy in the United Kingdom that is nothing short of catastrophic.

We need to work towards creating institutions that can advise the Government with evidence, authority and expertise. The truth is that we have proceeded with drugs policy for more than five decades on the basis not of evidence, but of reputation and what people think—exactly what my right hon. Friend was saying about the implications of the word “cannabis” and what people adduce to it. We have not proceeded on the evidence.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for making that point, because if we were to adopt the same approach with opiates, we would be giving people “heroin” as pain relief: we call it morphine, but it is heroin by another name. If we continue to talk

about medicinal “cannabis”, stigma will continue to attach to the part that gives a hallucinogenic effect. That is the part that everyone will focus on unless we start to change the direction, the language and the naming, which is why the medical profession is blackballing it on every occasion.

Crispin Blunt: The hon. Gentleman has landed on the core of the problem: the reputational issues that we are dealing with.

We owe it to our constituents to do just a little better. We owe it to them to try to understand the evidence and create institutions that will advise our Government based on the evidence. We have a duty not to be stampeded by the popular press in a particular direction about the particular meanings of words, but we have done so for 50 years in regard to cannabis: it was shoved in schedule 1 to the regulations made under the 1971 Act, which governed the most dangerous narcotics, and we kissed goodbye to 50 years of understanding within the medical research sector of what might be possible.

We were then left with the situation that we faced in 2017: after my two and a half years’ experience as prisons Minister, the evidence was plain throughout the entire justice system, as it is today, that our wider drugs policy is an unqualified disaster. We have watched the frog in the pot as the temperature has risen and risen over five decades; it is now boiling over and shreds are coming off. We have the worst drugs death rate in Europe and our drugs policy has dominance over the criminal justice system, driving half of acquisitive crime in the UK. Those issues elide into the narrow issue of medicine from cannabis, but we owe it to our constituents to understand the context.

I say this to the Minister particularly: if we can get the change of approach right, there is a huge opportunity. It is not just about the magnificent campaign by End Our Pain and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead for the 17 identified epileptic children and their families, although of course there are duties that we all owe to them, and they raise the question of what we would do in their position. I was in the Chamber when my right hon. Friend said that he and Frank Field would be at customs to deliver the bottles of medicine—and an absolutely splendid occasion it was, too.

It is not just about epileptic children; it is also about people with multiple sclerosis. An estimated 50,000 people in this country are growing their own medicine, at peril of a 14-year prison sentence, all to try to make themselves better. From those 50,000, there is a huge amount of research evidence, all of which is lost to the legal system: people are growing particular plants and adjusting the exact balance of the cannabis product that they produce to best use for their condition.

Adam Afriyie: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I have chaired the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, and it seems to me that medicines generally arise because of people’s behaviour beforehand. People were chewing bark because they felt that it relieved pain, and now we have aspirin. I think that much of the development of medicines—very precise and targeted medicines—comes from the experience of people and what they do themselves. As my hon. Friend says, there is a body of evidence, and it is a matter of collating that evidence, but it is also a matter of the

[Adam Afriyie]

people who adopt these methods at an early stage taking on a risk for themselves, and we should use the information and evidence that we gain from that to build on the scientific knowledge that we have.

Crispin Blunt: I was delighted to take that intervention from my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right: this is about science and technology. It is about finding a route to a Government who can deliver policy based on evidence. We have heard very clearly why randomised controlled trials and placebos are not going to work in this case and are a completely inappropriate way of providing proof, and that there is a vast amount of observed evidence out there. What we need to do is understand the context. The case is unanswerable for these epileptic children—of course it is, and of course their treatment should be should be paid for privately if it cannot be provided by the NHS because all these barriers have appeared—but behind them sit a vast number of other people who are not being served by our system of developing drugs that will work for their conditions.

Tonia Antoniazzi: The hon. Gentleman has made some very valid points about the wider issue of drug reform, and I agree with much of what he has said. As he well knows, when I first came to the House the late Paul Flynn, then Member of Parliament for Newport West, was a doughty campaigner for medicinal cannabis. I had many conversations with him about it, and much account was taken of what he said. He advanced valid arguments about people with multiple sclerosis, many of whom were our constituents, and I believe that the hon. Gentleman too has a genuine argument in that regard. Tonight, however, we are focusing on the cost of medicinal cannabis to end the pain of epileptic children, and our real ask of the Government is a fund to provide them with money immediately, although we will work together on the wider debate.

Crispin Blunt: I wholly agree with the hon. Lady, whose leadership of the all-party parliamentary group on access to medical cannabis under prescription, along with that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, adds to the whole discussion and illuminates the fact that our drugs policy is in a serious state of strife. It is not based on evidence, and we have to drag it in that direction. Behind the hon. Lady sits my friend the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), with whom I have the honour of co-chairing the all-party parliamentary group for drug policy reform. We took over from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and from Paul Flynn. My objective, as the first Conservative to take his place, was to drag this conversation into the mainstream, which is where it belongs.

However, we need to remember just what got this over the line in the first place. The Dingley family behaved perfectly within the rules. They made applications and everything else, and indeed we had an urgent question on the subject. I remember my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead interrogating the then Policing Minister, who had taken on the responsibility, about when this was going to happen, particularly for Billy Caldwell.

What got this over the line, however, was the fact that Bill Caldwell's mum, Charlotte, was brave enough to obtain the medicine in north America, present it to customs and have it confiscated. Her son was then hospitalised and was fitting, and within three days the overseeing consultant was on the steps of the hospital saying, "I do not care about what is going on here; it is unbelievably cruel to take a medicine that works away from a child." The following day, the then Home Secretary—now, wonderfully, the Health and Social Care Secretary: what a brilliant repositioning that is—authorised the return of Billy's medicine, or at least some of it, from customs so that he could receive his treatment.

Sir Mike Penning: While we are name-checking colleagues, we should mention one chap who is not here because he has left the House, and that is Frank Field. My hon. Friend referred to Frank—[*Interruption.*] Oh, he is in the other House now, is he? Lucky fella! Frank and I were absolutely adamant that the following day, we were going to go to Holland and come back, and that unless a change to the legislation had been indicated the following day, we would be arrested. But what a great reason to be arrested, trying to save someone's life! It was Frank's idea, and I jumped on with him—we should also acknowledge other people including Billy Caldwell's family and Alfie's family; I completely agree with that—but without Frank jumping in as well, we would really have struggled.

Crispin Blunt: This is where we come to the cost, to which the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) drew my attention. In order to get Alfie Dingley's prescription over the line, it would have taken £5,000 for the person who was going to make the application, who happened to be on holiday in the Galapagos Islands and who then had to be interviewed by Home Office officials before he was allowed to make the application; £5,000 for the pharmacy to get a licence to bring it in; £5,000 for the pharmacy then to hand it out to the doctor; and then £5,000 for the licence for the prescribing doctor. I mean, I ask you! It might have been possible to pay in that case, but behind the case of Alfie Dingley, there is not just a score of epileptic children.

Tonia Antoniazzi: On that point, I made two journeys to The Hague with families—out of my own pocket, which was absolutely fine; it was not funded by anybody—because they needed the support to go over and get those medicines. They do not have the extra money and they do not have the time, which is why we stand by them and why we have to help them.

Crispin Blunt: The hon. Lady has behaved as the best of constituency MPs would. Indeed, I am sure that all of us, faced with the opportunity to help people in that way, would want to do so.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that, despite the legalisation in November 2018, the system remains broken. It remains broken in respect not only of cannabis but of the psychedelics. A wave of interest came into medicine as a result of cannabis; it came from North America where a significant amount of investor money was going into the new industry because people could see the opportunities that were

available there. However, we could not do the research here because it was a schedule 1 drug, and hardly any universities had a schedule 1 licence to do that research. The level of oversight was far greater than that for heroin, as the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) said, so it is no wonder that there has been almost no research on all this down the decades.

As far as I can see from the 1960s, the psychedelics got shoved into that group as well because pop stars used them. Then, in 2008, we managed to dismiss the chairman of the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs because he had the presumption to say that riding a horse was a damn sight more dangerous than MDMA. That is what we do to the scientists who produce the evidence: we refuse to listen to the evidence because it will be politically inconvenient and subject to misrepresentation in the media. We owe our constituents way more than that, and it would be remiss of us if we do not examine this whole area on the evidence. I implore my hon. Friend the Minister to listen to it.

I have spoken about MS, and the hon. Member for South Antrim and others have referred to pain relief. As an alternative to opiate-based medicines, given all the difficulties of the opiate crisis in the United States, cannabis-based medicines offer a serious group of advantages if they can be deployed properly. Meanwhile the psychedelics still sit in schedule 1, making research incredibly difficult and expensive.

Let us consider depression, addiction and trauma. Of the veterans who have come back from their service in Afghanistan and Iraq in recent years, 7,500 have post-traumatic stress disorder, about a third of whom are beyond treatment within the current treatments available. However, the evidence is that the prescribed and overseen use of psychedelics can get to the relevant part of the brain and enable the psychotherapy to take hold and teach people to acquire the tools with which to manage and deal with their trauma. That can also work for depression and addiction. We are potentially talking about millions of people, if we enable the research to happen. Are we a country that will be on the frontline of bioscience? Are we serious? There is an opportunity for our pharmaceutical industry to get this to scale, and millions of people can be helped.

A huge cost is currently imposed on our economy by these medical conditions, so surely it makes sense to enable my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, as Minister for medicines, to draw on evidence-based advice. Sitting alongside the MHRA ought to be some kind of cannabis authority, as has been done in Denmark, Holland and Germany, for Ministers to get the advice they need to be able to advance policy confidently, and it needs to be within a wider office for drug control that engages all the relevant Departments. A Department of Health and Social Care lead would be good, but a Cabinet Office lead that brings together everyone who has an interest in this area would be a fine thing, too.

Adam Afriyie: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, although I do not entirely agree with all his views on the legalisation of drugs. I was shadow Minister for Science back in the day when Professor Nutt was forced to resign for making comments that were factually accurate, and the House is now very different. I feel quite optimistic today, like the hon. Member for

Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), because I sense the mood of the Chamber and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. If there were some mechanism to bring in the clearly available research on people who have already been using these refined substances, I think the Government and this House are in the mood to take those views on board.

Crispin Blunt: I largely agree with my hon. Friend, apart from on the views he imputed to me. He decided what my views are on the legalisation of drugs, but I simply want policy based on evidence.

All I will say is that the current situation is a catastrophe, not just here but around the world. It is the basic reason why we were run out of Helmand province. The farmers around Didcot were growing poppies for the legal medical morphine market, but we did not allow the farmers in Helmand to grow poppies, so they were driven into the heroin market. We then decided to go and burn their crops, reducing them to penury. And we wonder why they changed sides and were against us. We were run out of Helmand, even with 20,000 American troops coming to the aid of our soldiers.

This issue permeates the world. It is a global issue. We simply need to proceed on the basis of the evidence, so we need to create the institutions that can give us that evidence. There should be an office for drug control, promoting all the science and bioscience of which this country should be capable, within which ought to be a cannabis authority of some kind that could give the Minister and her colleagues the advice they need. The opportunity for the Department of Health and Social Care is huge, and the opportunity for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in sponsoring our science is enormous. The opportunity for the Treasury is not exactly minuscule either, and there is an opportunity for the Home Office to have a policy that contributes to the whole of the public interest, not just a very narrow part of it that has done so much damage. The policy of preventing things from happening has been in the lead in the drugs policy area, so this proposal is long overdue.

I beg the Minister to have this discussion with me and the think-tank I have established. I have no financial interest to declare, as I take nothing from the Conservative Drug Policy Reform Group. I set it up to give me research and scientific evidence on which to help advance these arguments. I am passionate about this issue, and it is one of the issues on which I wish to use my remaining time in public life. Having seen what I have seen as Prisons Minister and in my own experience, I know the opportunities are as great as the opportunity to end the terrible mess of our wider drugs policy. If we can grasp the science opportunity, the medical opportunity follows. There would be a huge advantage for patients in the United Kingdom.

Tonia Antoniazzi: The work the hon. Gentleman does with his think-tank is brilliant. How much would this cost? How much does he think the Government need to put aside—we are talking about the cost of medicinal cannabis—to reform policy? Are there any figures? Are there any plans to put that in place?

Crispin Blunt: The machinery of government changes can be made at very little cost. This is about getting the right advisers and the machinery of government advice.

[Crispin Blunt]

Obviously, we would then have to recruit the people into the cannabis authority who understand the issue, and allow them the authority and space to be able to advise Ministers and the office of drug control. However, the up-front cost would be minimal. The opportunities and the number of people we can really help by having far better drug provision in the UK are huge. All of us have a duty to engage properly with that and to be able to disaggregate all the issues and negative connotations associated with the use of cannabis and heroin. Let us focus on the evidence and get this conversation into the mainstream as a means by which we can make huge advances for our country. I look forward to the ongoing conversations with the Minister, who as the Minister for medicine could make a huge impact if she were able to deliver on this part of her agenda.

9.11 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Thank you very much for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker. I just jumped up quickly before you changed your mind! [Laughter.]

I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for securing this debate, which has been great; we were looking forward to a 30-minute Adjournment debate, a battle through and a quick exchange of views, but because nobody cares that much about national insurance contributions amendments, we have been given this extra time. I will not take too much more, because a lot has been covered by the previous speaker and there is no point going over old ground. I would genuinely like to say that at 9.10 on a Monday evening there is nothing I would rather be doing on my birthday than fighting the cause of something I truly believe in.

On 19 March 2019, the then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said that medical cannabis “would be made available”. If I had heard those words as the parent of a child who would have benefited, I would have been thinking that it was going to be made available. I would not be expecting to jump through hoops or to have to raise thousands of pounds to pay for it. My hopes would have been raised. A child with such a condition would, typically, have 30 seizures a day and so over 900 days we are talking about 27,000 seizures. If they had had medical cannabis, we could be talking about zero seizures. However, it will be made available some day. After this time, the general frustration in this Chamber is, “Why are we still talking about it?” We have said this a number of times in Westminster Hall, and here and there, and we know everything that has been said today.

I am genuinely glad that the Minister has informed us that we are now manufacturing some of these medicines here in the UK, as that is a big step forward. However, we are still reliant on private prescriptions and, as was pointed out earlier, the main provider of those is about to retire. Yet again, if I was a parent in that situation, would the sword of Damocles not be hanging over me? This is the same idea as what happened when we left the EU—we could not get the medicines in and we had to have an extension to January, to July and now to next year. That is a ticking timebomb hanging over those young lives that we just do not need to have there. The long and short of it is that people who cannot afford it or cannot raise the funds for it—during covid, raising

funds for many a charitable cause has been incredibly difficult—simply go without. They go without and so there are 27,000 seizures because they have to go without a medicine that they know is available and know would do the job for their child. It should not be this way. In less time, we have developed, tested and rolled out a covid vaccine throughout the United Kingdom. The vaccine did not exist, it had to be tested, and we have done it. It concerns me that these kids are less of a priority.

What are the UK Government going to do? How will they finally going create a legal framework in which GPs are comfortable writing prescriptions for cannabis-based medical products? If we could do that, it would be a game-changer. I am not playing politics with this issue, but I have contacted the Scottish Government, and in Scotland if people get an NHS prescription, the Government will pay for it. The same thing has to apply down here, so let us facilitate that. Let us go to doctors, explain what it is we are asking them to do and give them the confidence to stand up and do it. If a senior clinician can do it, a GP can do it.

Tonia Antoniazzi: The point the hon. Gentleman is making is really interesting. With covid, we have seen so many families really struggle and their children have been hospitalised—we are talking about such vulnerable children—so his point is so valuable. I thank him for all his work on this issue because together, across party lines, we will take this issue forward.

Ronnie Cowan: I thank the hon. Lady very much. The point that this is very much a cross-party issue should not be missed. We are not going to split down party lines or fall out over this. We will fall out over other things—I am absolutely sure of that—but this issue has strong cross-party support. I look around the Chamber at the Members present and I know the different politics we have, yet we are united behind this cause. The Government should take real note of that. I know they have a working majority of 80 or so, but people in the Conservative party are rightly backing this issue.

I shall not keep the House any longer. I fully acknowledge that the past 20 months have been incredibly demanding for the Department of Health and Social Care. We all get that—we all appreciate what has been done during that time—but the time for talking is well and truly over and the time for action has well and truly arrived.

9.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing this debate. I agree with colleagues’ comments: it has been incredibly helpful to have time to talk about this issue. As I sat on the Front Bench, the debate highlighted to me, first, the needs of these children and their families, and secondly, the complexity of the whole situation. We can make statements, but there are no easy solutions. This issue involves the medical profession, licensing and trials.

Let me thank all those who have contributed to the debate. In no particular order, so as not to upset anybody—I have met many of those who have contributed on numerous occasions—I thank my hon. Friends the Members for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and

for Windsor (Adam Afriyie), and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for South Antrim (Paul Girvan).

I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright), who is not in his place but with whom I have met. As is the constituency MP for Hannah Deacon and Alfie, he has contacted me and spoken to me on several occasions.

I thank the hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), to whom I shall not forget to wish a happy birthday.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said, we have known each other a long time and I have carried his bags on more than one occasion—

Sir Mike Penning: Not no more!

Jo Churchill: Not no more, but I understand where his passion comes from.

I can also see in their places the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith)—we have spoken about this matter—and my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt).

At the heart of this debate for me are Alfie; Billy; Eddie Braun, who was not mentioned; Murray; Jorja; Maya; Bailey Williams, mentioned by the hon. Member for Gower; Sophia; and others. It is about those children. I have personally met several of the families and heard at first hand how it feels not to be able to have anything more. To be honest, as a mum of four, I can say that sympathy feels a bit useless when it comes to a mother who, in some cases, can watch their child fit 100 times a day. They have explained to me the relief that applying Bedrolite under the tongue brings to their children. They have spoken about the financial challenges, but I would like to use the time available to go over some of the challenges that I am trying to wrestle with to get to a solution.

We have had an accordion debate tonight. Initially, the hon. Member for Edinburgh West said that this debate was about access to NHS prescriptions. However, many others also spoke about how much this might benefit multiple sclerosis sufferers and those with chronic pain. Indeed, Lord Field in the other place has written to me on this subject and spoken about the relief of chronic pain that I think he himself gets from using a cannabis-based product. However, there does have to be an evidence base that is more than observational.

Tonia Antoniazzi: There has been a lot of talk about randomised control trials this evening, and I understand the difficulty that the NHS has with this. We have had numerous meetings with NHS England and with pharmacists on this. The issue is that the RCTs are a no-goer. They are just a no-goer. I would never take my child off a drug if I knew that it could possibly kill them in order to enable the NHS to prescribe. We have to overcome that hurdle. I would like to see a push from the Minister to make that change happen. We have seen it with covid and we have seen it with the vaccine. What the NHS has done is incredible. I would really love to have the Minister onside to be able to push the NHS forward to change its mind over the RCTs.

Jo Churchill: I understand that point and I have said to those parents that I would struggle. In fact I would probably find it impossible to offer my child something else when they were already gaining relief from something. However, as we have debated here today, there are probably two issues here: the treatment of those children who are already on Bedrolite; and the need for an evidence base, particularly when we start to talk about expanding the use of cannabis medicines for those suffering from a large range of other medical issues, be it MS sufferers and so on. This is where the challenge comes. Clinicians rightly want to prescribe based on the evidence so that they do their patients no harm. Many people have said that this is the place of last resort for these parents, but we have this difficulty.

Sir Mike Penning *rose*—

Jo Churchill: I will go on to explain why after my right hon. Friend's intervention.

Sir Mike Penning: I have two points. The first is that it is not all Bedrolite. A lot of these parents do not have Bedrolite. There are myriad specialist ones with different THC levels, but they have been prescribed by a consultant. I know what my hon. Friend said, but these are consultants, and they do want to prescribe the drug and they have prescribed it, but they are not allowed to put it on an NHS prescription unless you are Alfie, Billy or any of the others. It just does not make sense.

Jo Churchill: I agree that there are other medicines, but one of the challenges is how we treat people with ongoing needs as their conditions vary, if we do not have the ability to understand how the body is responding.

I will push on a little bit. Let me provide an update on Bedrocan oils from the Netherlands. As stated previously, the commercial agreement between Transvaal Apotheek and the UK special medicines manufacturer, Target Healthcare, is progressing. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the Home Office are working with those companies to ensure that all regulatory standards for manufacturing these medicines in this country are met. We continue to work closely with the Dutch Government, Transvaal, the Home Office and the MHRA—which I have met with and which says it will look at the international evidence—to ensure continuity of supply until domestic production has been established. We have had movement; I can sense the frustration in the House tonight, but we are moving forward. I will continue to keep the House informed of progress.

On the main topic of the debate, it is undeniable that it is incredibly hard for many of the patients and their families. As many Members have said, the challenges have done nothing but worsen during the covid-19 pandemic. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), when he was Home Secretary, changed the law to allow unlicensed cannabis-based products for medicinal use to be prescribed by doctors on the General Medical Council's specialist register. This removed legislative barriers to legitimate use as a medicine. However, there is still caution across specialists in their ability and willingness to prescribe. [*Interruption.*] Indeed. However,

[Jo Churchill]

with respect, if the prescribing of these medicines by a clinical specialist was that seamless, we would have more of it, but we do not.

The whole thing comes back to the fact that clinicians want to rely on an evidence base, and that includes clinicians in Scotland. We recently received a letter from the Scottish Government, outlining that Dr Rose Marie Parr, former chief pharmaceutical officer, had chaired a teleconference with key paediatric neurologists from specialist centres. The clinicians had a clear and united view that, following the GMC and British Paediatric Neurology Association guidelines, they would be unwilling to prescribe CBPMs containing THC, including Bedrolite, until there is clearer, published evidence available following a clinical trial.

Tonia Antoniazzi *rose—*

Christine Jardine *rose—*

Dr Cameron *rose—*

Jo Churchill: All three Members rose at the same time. I will make my next point before I take interventions.

While the evidence base remains limited, I am sure that everybody, including clinicians in this place, will agree that decisions on whether to prescribe, as with any other medicine, have to remain clinical decisions. A doctor would not appreciate me in their consulting room telling them that they did not know their job as a doctor.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the Minister for giving way again. I would just like to point out to her that that is not the case. There are three NHS prescriptions. If the law was changed, why are there those three NHS prescriptions? Either these medicines are safe or they are not. They must be safe. I understand what she is saying about the clinicians, but let us look at the risk-benefit for the particular group of children we are talking about. We know that “First do no harm” is how our clinicians treat their patients, but they have to move forward. Hannah Deacon is a classic example. She is continuing to campaign because she sees the unfairness and injustice that Alfie has his prescription but other children do not. Please, Minister, help us to move this debate forward.

Jo Churchill: Hannah has said those exact words to me. That is why I say that we have to look at this in a selection of doable, achievable pieces, because it is not possible to look at it for every condition. We are talking about those children with refractory epilepsy, and trying to find solutions there is my main focus currently.

Christine Jardine: I am not a medical person; I am a parent. I think back to the start of covid-19 when we were told that it would take years to do the clinical trials and to do everything that was necessary to have a safe vaccine, but now we have it, and a successful roll-out, because there was the will to do it—to think out of the box. I think for many people the frustration comes from the question of why the medical profession are not being encouraged to look at an alternative way of

finding the reassurance that will enable them to be looking at the observational evidence from abroad and taking it on board. They will be looking to the Government to encourage them to do that.

Jo Churchill: I would like to reassure the hon. Lady that we do look elsewhere, but it fundamentally comes back to the fact that observational trials on very small cohorts are not the best way to develop the policy, going forward, to treat these individuals. That is notwithstanding the fact that the observations of all the parents I have met, and others who have seen their children benefit, are the foundation for making us try to put our shoulders to the wheel in order to do better. I think there is that tension.

Looking across other countries, my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) said, “If they can do it, why can’t we?” What is needed to support routine prescribing is the evidence base of safety and efficacy, public funding and cost-effectiveness. This is the system that we use in the UK for all medicines and medical devices, and it is really difficult to see a case for why cannabis should be treated differently from that on a broader spectrum, particularly when we take into account the comment by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) that there is a need to look at how these medicines may help others suffering from chronic pain. I have been told that multiple sclerosis and palliative care are other areas, and so on. If we are going to broaden this, then we must look to do the job properly.

Dr Cameron: I thank the Minister for grappling with what is a very complex matter. I totally understand what she is saying. I can understand some clinicians’ reluctance because they do not want to prescribe something when they do not know what is contraindicated in relation to other conditions and they do not want to do harm. But this must potentially be done where the children are already benefiting from some kind of expedited process to ensure that they can have the prescriptions and that parents are not having to try to fund that in so many different ways, causing that stress. There must then be some kind of expedited clinical trial that shows that clinicians more broadly can have the confidence that they are prescribing medications that will support conditions, do no harm and would not be contraindicated or cost children or adults their lives if prescribed to the wrong individuals.

Jo Churchill: I thank the hon. Lady because she encapsulates in a nutshell what the challenges are. This is extremely difficult without that knowledge of what the contraindications are. I was trying to suggest, perhaps not as eloquently as I could have done, that we need these different bits in order to make the policy work. As the House has heard, the current Health Secretary was the Home Secretary when he changed the law, and at our very first meeting, he told me it was one of the things he was very keen to see us move forward on.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Jo Churchill: I am going to make a little progress, because at this rate we will go up to the end of the time. I will come to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead.

While saying that it should remain a clinical decision for doctors—indeed, that was very much what I took from the hon. Member for South Leicestershire, because it would be inappropriate for Ministers in Whitehall or the Scottish Government to influence individual prescribing decisions—with the exception of three licensed medicines, cannabis-based products for medicinal use are not first-line medicines and are not routinely funded. Most cannabis-based medicines are unlicensed medicines, and that means they are yet to have their quality, safety or efficacy assured by regulators here or, indeed, anywhere else around the world. Nor has their cost-effectiveness been decided by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which is how we administer medicines. Those are the foundations of NHS decisions about routine funding. The cost of treatments sought privately remains the responsibility of the patients, and I am not cloth-eared to how difficult that is and why we need to try to find a solution.

Sir Mike Penning *rose*—

Tonia Antoniazzi *rose*—

Jo Churchill: I will give way first to my right hon. Friend.

Sir Mike Penning: The Minister is being very generous, although we have plenty of time. I think we have until half-past 10, Mr Deputy Speaker, should we or you wish. I have two questions. The hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) asked a specific question: how is it safe on the NHS for three prescriptions to be given to three children, paid for by the NHS, but not any others? Is it safe, or is it not? The Minister referred earlier to clinicians not having the confidence to give the prescriptions. Is she aware that one of the clinicians was reported to the General Medical Council for writing a prescription and was exonerated? That is why they are scared; they are scared for their careers. How can it be safe for three children, but not the other children whose lives can be saved?

Jo Churchill: I thank my right hon. Friend. I have met clinicians, as well as the families. Like just about every other area of medicine, there is divergence in how they approach it. There are those who prescribe and those who do not. I have also spoken to Alfie's general practitioner, who was very articulate in describing the benefits that Alfie saw from taking medicinal cannabis. However, it is still fundamentally the decision of the clinician who has the child as the patient. One thing that has been said to me is that it is important, as we try to move forward and do better, to ensure that private specialists also have conversations with those who are treating the children for other issues in their NHS care, because of contraindications and so on, as was referred to earlier.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the Minister for being so generous with her time. The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) has made a real point about there being a culture of fear within the NHS and with clinicians, who are too scared to prescribe because they do not know what the consequences are. The Minister has a role to play here in enabling them to have the confidence to prescribe and work with the drug

that we refer to as cannabis. In this House, we should not be using the word “cannabis”, because it strikes that fear into the hearts of many, many people across the UK. Most other drugs have a single active ingredient; medical cannabis has many. If the Minister does not accept that randomised control trials are not applicable, we are in a Catch-22 situation and we are forever stuck. This is not acceptable.

Jo Churchill: I do not believe we are stuck, but we should proceed with caution. I think that is a totally acceptable way to go on. I think it was the hon. Member for Edinburgh West who asked why it is any different from insulin or the other drugs she listed. It is different, so we must proceed with caution.

Christine Jardine: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Jo Churchill: One minute. The cost of parents accessing private treatments remains the responsibility of patients. I am aware that the cost remains high and has brought immeasurable hardship to some families. However, the Government cannot stipulate what companies charge for these products. Furthermore, these are controlled drugs that are specially manufactured or imported for the treatment of an individual patient with an unmet clinical need. In such cases, there are also international treaties with which we have to abide, which mean that companies exporting or importing controlled drugs incur fees to support the necessary governance processes.

We have done an enormous amount within the constraints of the treaties to reduce the costs, making clear what the rules are about and how much can be imported under each notification, and allowing licensed importers to have a small additional supply so that children can get hold of a supply. The supply can be drawn from when a prescription is given by a specialist doctor, reducing the amount of time that a patient might wait for their medicine and helping to ensure continuity. However, the export of finished Bedrocan oils from the Netherlands is currently restricted under Dutch law, so the latter change does not apply to those products. The licensed cannabis-based products Sativex, nabilone and Epidiolex, for which there is clear evidence of safety clinical trials and cost-effectiveness, are provided routinely on the NHS for their licensed indications. Indeed, last month, the licensed indication for Epidiolex was expanded to those with tuberous sclerosis complex. I have heard from parents who have tried some of these drugs and found them not to be successful for their children, but it is important that as we build a better reference for cannabis-derived medicines, we have a suite of products that we can draw on.

Christine Jardine: I thank the Minister for giving way; she is being incredibly generous with her time. I would like to say, however, that when I referred to insulin and inhalers, I was not comparing medicine with medicine; I was talking about the principle of having to pay for something that makes such a fundamental difference to people's lives, and how families are having to pay when, as other hon. Members have said, NHS prescriptions have been issued.

Jo Churchill: I apologise for the confusion; I misheard.

[Jo Churchill]

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Jo Churchill: One second. On the expansion of Epidiolex, NICE will work with the manufacturer to assess the clinical and cost-effectiveness of the medicine in the indicated patient group before making recommendations for routine prescribing and funding on the NHS. That is the proof. Where there is the will and investment in clinical trials, cannabis-based medicines can achieve the medicinal licence that is the gateway to routine funding. They have become a useful tool for clinicians in treating diseases where other licensed treatments have failed, but the licensing process also provides for the development of the evidence and information that doctors rely on to support their treatment decisions, as was laid out by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt). The MHRA is well equipped to provide advice to any prospective applicants wishing to conduct clinical trials or marketing authorisations. Indeed, there have been 13 trials ongoing in the UK in the past 12 months, and six other trials of this type of medicine have been completed.

On refractory epilepsy and the children we are specifically interested in tonight—that is not to exclude any other patient group—NHS England, NHS Improvement and the National Institute for Health Research have confirmed in principle support for two randomised control trials on early onset and genetic generalised epilepsy. These will compare medicines that contain cannabis oil, CBD only and medicines that contain CBD plus THC with placebos. While, like many other projects during the pandemic, there have been delays on commercial discussions, these are nearing completion. Once supply contracts have been finalised, the study team will be able to initiate the formal trial set-up process and confirm a date for patient recruitment. This is a pioneering area of research, and we are keen to support patients by progressing these trials as soon as possible. I feel keenly the frustration that they have taken so long, and I hope to be in a position to make a further announcement on these clinical trials in the next few weeks.

Jeff Smith: The Minister is being very generous in giving way, and I know she wants to find a solution to this problem. I tried to get in earlier when she referred to some parents who had used medical cannabis and found that some of it worked and some of it did not work. It sounds like an evidence base was being created there. I understand that she does not want to create a system for all our medical regulation based on observational trials, but there are many experts who say that randomised control trials will not work for cannabis and we need another way of getting the evidence. Given that we clearly have a system that is not working, is there not a case for this particular condition and this particular type of medicine being a special case? We need to find a different way of creating such an evidence base to give the clinicians comfort.

Jo Churchill: I will focus on the end bit. We do need to give clinicians comfort if they are going to prescribe medicines that help alleviate children's pain. The challenge with the observational trial, as anyone who has been involved with medical trials will tell you, is that the

smaller the cohort, very often the greater the problem is with the confidence intervals, and so on and so forth. There is a need to look at things by perhaps turning the telescope the other way up to see whether we can focus ourselves on approaching this in a different way to find solutions. However, the bottom line is that we need good evidence, because we have also been in this Chamber talking about drugs where the challenge to the patient has then transpired, and we later we have been here talking about the damage.

Crispin Blunt: Particularly in the light of what my hon. Friend has just said about turning the telescope around and thinking about this in a different way, this is not just about the United Kingdom; this is global. There is evidence all over the world that we can use, and we do have a terrible tendency of “not invented here” in some of this. There are other countries in which the authorities are finding a positive way to license this medicine. While obviously the focus is on these particular children now, behind them sit tens of thousands of people self-medicating on cannabis and making themselves criminals in the process. Behind them sit our 2,500 veterans who have untreatable trauma, who are being driven into the hands of dealers to find ways of managing that trauma. We are turning heroes into junkies because we are not advancing the science base as fast as we should.

We should be really supporting the research, which is why I am delighted to hear what my hon. Friend has just said. Let us really go for this. We can underpin the bioscience base of our country if we do so. We have just seen Dr Carhart-Harris, a leading researcher in the whole application of psychedelics, disappear from doing research in London to the United States. It is exactly the parallel argument with medicine from cannabis. We need to get behind the scientists and the researchers, and let them help our people and teach our medical profession what is available to them to help their patients.

Jo Churchill: That is true. However, people have to come forward with clinical trials designed in a way that is acceptable and gives us robust outcomes. We have discussed this and Psilocybin, and many other things, at some length in the past, and although tonight is not the time to carry that on I am sure we will do so again.

We take into account literature and evidence from other countries, and the guidelines published by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence were developed in accordance with well-established processes based on internationally recognised and accepted standards. This ensures a systematic, transparent approach in identifying the best available international evidence within the scope of guidance at the time of the NICE evidence review. However, NICE found that current research is limited and of low quality, and that makes it difficult to assess just how effective these medicines are, and we need to make sure they are safe.

Adam Afriyie: I empathise with the Minister; this is tricky, because one does have to introduce medicines in a safe way according to a set formula and we have quite a good system.

I have two points. First, we were talking about prescribing to children untested or unvalidated medicines, yet in some treatments we are prescribing adult steroids to

children. Will the Minister say something about that, as it seems slightly inconsistent? Secondly, there are patients, in particular children, who shortly will have no prescription whatsoever when the last specialist who can make these prescriptions retires. How are we going to cover that?

Jo Churchill: I am obviously very cognisant of the latter point, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead mentioned a court case. This adds to the need to find solutions to the problem. On adult steroids, that is a clinical decision by a doctor, and my hon. Friend would not expect me to comment on that, because we are dealing here with incredibly poorly children, and our heart goes out to them.

Tonia Antoniazzi *rose*—

Jo Churchill: The hon. Lady is looking at her phone intently and jumping up again, so I will give way.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the Minister for her generosity in giving way, and she is right that I want to make yet another observation.

One of the reasons why we all came into this House was to make change happen, and I know the Minister feels exactly the same. Maybe her hands are tied, but under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 the Secretary of State has the power to commission an investigation and research into new medicines. End our Pain has shown this to her officials several times; it has even been cited by a Queen's counsel, whose opinion is that this is possible. This would be a great way to run an observational trial at no cost to parents; why will the Minister not take this option?

Jo Churchill: It is not in my gift to take that option, but I will take that comment back to the Health Secretary and have further discussions. As I said, in our very first meeting he highlighted this as an area where he wanted to see movement, and we are determined to get some movement.

We need the evidence base and we need trials to be ongoing to help inform future commissioning decisions. NHS England has also established a patient registry to collect uniform outcome data from licensed and unlicensed products. The refractory epilepsy specialist clinical advisory service has been established to provide expert impartial advice for clinicians treating complex cases while we await the outcome of clinical trials.

I hope I have managed to convey how committed I am, because I do believe that we ought to be able to find the solution for these children, and I was very aware of the hon. Lady's point about what happens when they reach adulthood. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead has spoken to me about the fact that as children move through and medicines gets better they thankfully survive longer, but then we have the added complexity of having to look at the system, which is why we want to make sure we find a solution. Finding the right solution is what we are after, because

it will take time to generate further evidence and see the results of clinical trials. I do understand, however, that patients and families continue to access these medicines privately, and that the cost of doing so is very high. There are no easy or quick solutions, but I am committed that the Department will reconsider what action the Government may reasonably take with regard to access to unlicensed cannabis-based products for medicinal use where clinically appropriate.

The health of the children and adults dealing so courageously with these difficult-to-treat conditions is of paramount importance. I think it was Hannah who said to me that for every time Alfie does not end up in hospital having fitted repeatedly, there is a saving to the system.

Alberto Costa: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Jo Churchill: Yes, finally, but then I am going to conclude.

Alberto Costa: My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) made the point that the Government did supply the medication from a different Department, at no cost to the parents. I have suggested to the Minister that the Government, only on a temporary basis, should cover the cost for the very small number of children across the country who desperately need this medication, which they obtain through private prescription. Can she commit today from the Dispatch Box that she will at least try her best to find the money from her Department to cover those costs on a temporary basis?

Jo Churchill: I hope that I outlined earlier that a mixture of solutions is needed to crack this problem. We are not taking anything off the table. We are looking at every option that we can to ensure that we get the right support. Health is devolved, and the access to and funding of medicines is a matter for the relevant devolved nation. I hope, however, that hon. Members have seen that we are all trying to work on the challenge together, because there should not be a difference. As people have said this evening, this is not partisan; it is about making sure that we get the right care to the children.

I will commit that the health of children and adults is of paramount importance. It is of paramount importance to the Secretary of State and to me. I can assure hon. Members that I will carry on making sure, with my team, that we are doing as much as we can to try to get us to a solution that helps these children in the short term but also the long term, while having as the second strand of work the evidence base that we need to support the wider prescribing of any drug, because we need to make sure that we are doing it with care.

Question put and agreed to.

9.57 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 6 September 2021

TREASURY

Government Shareholding in NatWest Group

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

I can today inform the House that on 22 July 2021 the Government announced a trading plan to sell part of the Government's shareholding in NatWest Group (NWG, formerly Royal Bank of Scotland, RBS). This is a further step forward in the Government's plan to return NWG to the private sector.

Rationale

It is Government policy that where a Government asset no longer serves a public policy purpose the Government may choose to sell that asset, subject to being able to achieve value for money. This frees up public resource which can be deployed to achieve other public policy objectives.

The Government are committed to returning NWG to full private ownership, now that the original policy objective for the intervention in NWG—to preserve financial and economic stability at a time of crisis—has long been achieved. The Government only conduct sales of NWG shares when it represents value for money to do so and market conditions allow. The announcement of this trading plan represents a further step forward for Government in exiting the assets acquired as a result of the 2007 to 2008 financial crisis.

Format and timing

The Government, supported by advice from UK Government Investments (UKGI), concluded that selling shares by way of an on-market trading plan will deliver value for money.

A trading plan involves selling shares in the market through an appointed broker in an orderly way at market value over the duration of the plan. Trading plans are an established method of returning Government-owned shares to private ownership, while protecting value for the taxpayer. This method was used in the sell-down of the Government's stake in Lloyds Banking Group (in that case, from a lower starting point in terms of the Government's percentage ownership).

This is the first use of a trading plan for disposals of NWG shares by the Government. This follows previous disposals of NWG shares via accelerated book builds in August 2015 and June 2018, a directed buyback selling shares to the company in March 2021, and a further accelerated bookbuild in May 2021. UKGI and HMT will keep other disposal options open, including by way of further directed buybacks and/or accelerated bookbuilds. The decision to launch the trading plan does not preclude the Government from using other disposal options to execute future transactions that achieve value for money for taxpayers, including during the term of the trading plan.

The trading plan commenced trading no earlier than 12 August and will run for 12 months, terminating no later than 11 August 2022. Shares will only be sold at a price that represents fair value and delivers value for money for the taxpayer. The final number of shares

sold will depend on, amongst other factors, the share price and market conditions throughout the duration of the trading plan.

The Government will provide Parliament with further details at the end of the term of the trading plan.

[HCWS259]

DEFENCE

Sheffield Forgemasters: Acquisition

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

The Ministry of Defence (MOD) has acquired Sheffield Forgemasters International Limited (SFIL), allowing HM Government to refinance the company and secure the supply of components for critical current and future UK defence programmes.

The MOD also intends to invest up to £400 million in SFIL over the next 10 years for defence-critical plant, equipment and infrastructure to support defence outputs. The acquisition has been assessed as the best value for money for the taxpayer due to SFIL's unique capabilities and circumstances. The immediate cost of the acquisition is £2.56 million for the entire share capital of the company, plus debt assumed.

SFIL is the only available manufacturer with the skills and capability to produce certain large-scale high-integrity castings and forgings from specialist steels in an integrated facility to the highest standards required for specific defence programmes. SFIL's ownership by the Government will not prevent other UK based manufacturers bidding for MOD contracts, which will continue to be run in an open and fair competition.

The MOD has already started working closely with the company to implement best practice governance that will ensure appropriate financial oversight to secure the company's future success, with the aim eventually to return the business to the private sector.

[HCWS261]

Armoured Cavalry Programme: Ajax

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin):

I wish to provide a further update to Parliament on the Ajax equipment project being delivered as part of the armoured cavalry programme.

Health and safety

Extensive work has been undertaken on the health and safety aspects of the noise and vibration concerns raised on Ajax. The report is being undertaken independently of the Ajax delivery team by the Ministry of Defence's director of health and safety.

While the report has not yet been concluded it is apparent that vibration concerns were raised before Ajax trials commenced at the armoured trials and development unit in November 2019. In December 2018, an army safety notice introduced restrictions on use in relation to vibration and identified that, in the longer term, a design upgrade was needed to reduce vibration.

I will publish the health and safety report once it is finalised, which will contain a full timeline in relation to health and safety issues. Key themes likely to emerge from the report will include:

The importance of having a culture that gives safety equal status alongside cost and schedule.

The overlapping of demonstration and manufacturing phases added complexity, technical risk and safety risk into the programme.

The value of having strong risk governance for complex projects that promotes access to expert technical advice on safety issues.

Independent certification and assurance of land environment capability should be adopted and modelled on best practice elsewhere in Defence.

Following the report's conclusion, we will consider what further investigations are required to see if poor decision making, failures in leadership or systemic organisational issues contributed to the current situation not simply in relation to health and safety but more broadly as necessary.

Update on personnel

Initially 121 personnel were identified as requiring urgent hearing assessments as a result of recent noise exposure on Ajax. Subsequently, the MOD broadened the scope of those who should be tested to all those who had been exposed to noise on Ajax. To date, a further 189 individuals have been identified who should be offered an assessment, giving a total number of 310 personnel. Of these 304 have been contacted successfully; the remaining six are UK service personnel who have recently left service and are in the process of being traced.

The health of our service personnel is our top priority. Some 248 personnel, including 113 from the original cohort of 121, have now been assessed. The Army continues to identify and monitor the hearing of all personnel exposed to noise on Ajax, with additional testing put in place where required. The Army is also in the process of identifying any health effects in those potentially exposed to vibration. Veterans who have been exposed to noise or vibration on this project will be supported throughout and will have access to the same assessments as those still serving. I will update the House on the number of personnel affected by noise and vibration in due course, including if any trends become apparent once the data has been analysed.

Technical issues

At present all dynamic testing and training on MOD's Ajax vehicles remains paused. A safety assurance panel for Ajax, comprising duty holders from MOD, General Dynamics, Millbrook and independent advisers, has been established to assure that independent testing can recommence safely at Millbrook proving ground. Subject to the panel's final endorsement and General Dynamics' own safety approvals, Millbrook trials are expected to resume imminently, initially deploying General Dynamics crew in MOD-owned vehicles, with real time monitoring of vibration and in-ear noise.

The independent trials at Millbrook are essential to provide the evidence to support fundamental root cause analysis and to enable the safe resumption of wider trials and training activity. The focus for the MOD and General Dynamics remains on identifying the root causes of the noise and vibration issues to develop long-term solutions to ensure Ajax meets the Army's need.

I have made clear that no declaration of initial operating capability will be made until solutions have been determined for the long-term resolution of the noise and vibration concerns. Work continues on both with General Dynamics heavily committed to delivering a safe resolution.

Over the summer, work has been conducted to examine design modifications to reduce the impact of vibration. A design modification to reduce the risk of noise through the communication system is in development and is currently being tested. These may represent part of the overall solution but considerable work needs to be undertaken before any such assurances can be given.

Until a suitable suite of design modifications has been identified, tested and demonstrated, it is not possible to determine a realistic timescale for the introduction of Ajax vehicles into operational service with the Army. We will not accept a vehicle that is not fit for purpose.

As is often the case with defence procurement process, there have been a number of limitations of use ("LOUs") placed on Ajax vehicles during the early phase of use. LOUs restricting speed and the maximum height for reversing over steps have now been removed and work continues on removing other LOUs.

Ajax is an important capability for the Army and we are committed to working with General Dynamics for its delivery. We have a robust, firm price contract with General Dynamics under which they are required to provide the vehicles as set out in the contract for the agreed price of £5.5 billion.

To assist in the delivery of Ajax we have identified the need for a full-time, dedicated senior responsible owner who will preferably be able to see the project through to completion, or indeed advise if the project is incapable of being delivered. A shortlist of candidates is currently under consideration. The Infrastructure and Projects Authority is also providing MOD with expert support to establish a recovery plan for the programme.

[HCWS260]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Update

The Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment (Nadhim Zahawi): Through the covid-19 vaccines programme, we have administered over 90 million vaccine doses in the UK, with recent PHE data suggesting that this has prevented over 24 million infections, 105,900 deaths and 82,100 hospitalisations in England alone. The vaccines are the most effective way of protecting the most vulnerable and minimising hospitalisations and deaths.

The independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) continues to consider emerging data. When Parliament was in recess the Committee provided advice in favour of:

- offering initial vaccination to all remaining 16 and 17-year-olds;
- offering a third dose in the primary vaccine schedule to all those aged 12 and over defined as severely immunosuppressed;
- and expanding the groups of 12 to 15-year-olds defined as at risk.

Her Majesty's Government (HMG) reviewed and accepted the advice. All four parts of the UK have accepted the JCVI's advice and will align their deployment in each nation.

I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members to bring to their attention the contingent liabilities relating to the expansion of the covid-19 vaccine programme taken during the summer recess.

Initial vaccination to all remaining 16 and 17-year-olds:

JCVI published further advice on the vaccination of children and young people on 4 August.

JCVI advised that all remaining 16 to 17-year-olds should be offered a first dose of Pfizer-BNT162b2 vaccine. This is in addition to the existing offer of two doses of vaccine to 16 to 17-year-olds who are in “at-risk” groups or in roles which present a high risk of transmission to vulnerable people.

Third dose in the primary vaccine schedule to all those aged 12 and over defined as severely immunosuppressed:

JCVI published its advice on vaccination for individuals with severe immunosuppression on 1 September.

JCVI advised that a third primary vaccine dose be offered to individuals aged 12 and above with severe immunosuppression in proximity of their first or second covid-19 vaccine doses in the primary schedule with a preference for mRNA vaccines for those aged 18 and over. Whether patients are eligible will be determined by their specialist clinician. For young people aged 12 to 17 years, the Pfizer-BNT162b2 remains the preferred choice.

A third primary dose is recommended for individuals with severe immunosuppression in order to bring these individuals up to nearer the same level of immunity that healthy individuals achieve through two primary doses, and this group will become eligible for a booster dose as part of a routine booster programme from around six months after their third primary dose, pending further advice.

Expanding the groups of 12 to 15-year-olds defined as at risk:

JCVI published further advice on expanding the vaccine offer to certain children and young people on 3 September.

JCVI advised that the offer of a course of vaccination should be expanded to include children aged 12 to 15 years with the following conditions:

- Haematological malignancy
- Sickle cell disease
- Type 1 diabetes
- Congenital heart disease,
- Other health conditions as described in Public Health England’s Green Book

This is in addition to the conditions specified in the existing advice on at risk 12 to 15-year-olds published on 19 July. JCVI advised that this group is offered a two-dose course of vaccination with Pfizer-BNT162b2 vaccine as the preferred option.

With deployment of additional doses of vaccines to severely immunosuppressed individuals and new groups of young people over the parliamentary summer recess, I am now updating the House on the liabilities that HMG have taken on in relation to further vaccine supply via this statement and attached departmental minutes containing descriptions of the liability undertaken. The agreement to provide indemnity with deployment of further doses to the population increases the statutory contingent liability of the covid-19 vaccination programme.

Deployment of effective vaccines to eligible groups has been and remains a key part of the Government’s strategy to manage covid-19. Willingness to accept the need for appropriate indemnities to be given to vaccine

suppliers has helped to secure access to vaccines with the expected benefits to public health and the economy alike much sooner than may have been the case otherwise.

Given the exceptional circumstances we are in, and the terms on which developers have been willing to supply a covid-19 vaccine, we along with other nations have taken a broad approach to indemnification proportionate to the situation we are in.

Even though the covid-19 vaccines have been developed at pace, at no point and at no stage of development has safety been bypassed. The MHRA approval for use of the currently deployed vaccines clearly demonstrates that this vaccine has satisfied, in full, all the necessary requirements for safety, effectiveness, and quality. We are providing indemnities in the very unexpected event of any adverse reactions that could not have been foreseen through the robust checks and procedures that have been put in place.

I will update the House in a similar manner as and when other covid-19 vaccines or additional doses of vaccines already in use in the UK are deployed.

HM Treasury has approved the proposal.

[HCWS257]

Written Parliamentary Questions 155392 and 170718: Correction

The Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health (Ms Nadine Dorries): I would like to inform the House that I wish to correct the formal record in relation to written answers to the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) on 2 March 2021 and the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on 25 March 2021.

The reply suggested that NHS England and Improvement was developing a case definition and model of care for children with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH).

The correct response was that NHSEI had run an initial workshop on long covid to discuss how best to develop a case definition and model of care for children at which the RCPCH was present.

The response was phased in a way that overstated the role of the RCPCH in producing clinical guidance. NICE is responsible for developing the clinical case definition of Long covid.

I would like to thank the RCPCH and its members for their contributions more broadly in improving the understanding of long covid in children.

[HCWS258]

Statutory Storage Limits for Gametes and Embryos

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State and Minister for Innovation (Lord Bethell of Romford) has today made the following written statement:

Family units and family formation in the UK are vastly different today than they were when the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (the HFE Act) was introduced and last reviewed. In a modern society, some individuals are choosing to start their families later

in life and are increasingly choosing to use new and effective techniques to freeze their eggs, sperm, or embryos to preserve fertility. The reasons for this are diverse but can include not being ready or able to start a family, medical conditions that might lead to premature infertility, or undergoing gender reassignment.

The HFE Act currently sets the statutory storage limits for eggs, sperm, and embryos at 10 years, with the possibility of extension up to 55 years for those who can demonstrate a clinical need. The Government recognise that these current arrangements are increasingly disadvantageous towards women and unnecessarily restrictive of individual freedom of choice about when to start a family.

In view of the significant scientific innovation and societal changes, the Government launched a public consultation on 11 February 2020, to seek views about changing the statutory storage limits. The consultation ran for 12 weeks and closed on 5 May 2020.

The Government are today announcing the publication of the Government response to the consultation.

We received 1,222 responses to the consultation, including 17 from key sector organisations. The responses were analysed and carefully considered by the Department of Health and Social Care giving due regard to the importance of equality, facilitating reproductive choice, administrative burden, and public acceptability.

In the light of these factors and the public response, the Government are announcing a change to this policy; to increase the statutory storage limits for eggs, sperm, and embryos for everyone, regardless of medical need, to 10-year renewable storage periods, with a maximum limit of 55 years. The legislation will be introduced when parliamentary time allows.

The regulator, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), will provide oversight during the introduction of these changes to ensure they are rolled out effectively and safely.

The proposed policy change is intended to facilitate greater reproductive choice and will allow for less stressful decision-making in family formation. Importantly, it will provide equity for all, regardless of medical need, and will help reduce administrative burden for clinics and the regulator.

A copy of the Government's response to the consultation will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

A regulatory triage assessment has also been published alongside the consultation. It can be accessed on gov.uk and will also be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2021-09-06/HCWS256/>.

[HCWS256]

Essex Mental Health Independent Inquiry: Terms of Reference

The Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health (Ms Nadine Dorries): On 21 January 2021, I announced the establishment of a non-statutory, independent inquiry into the circumstances of mental health in-patient deaths at the former North Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, the former South Essex Partnership University Trust and the Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, which took over responsibility for mental health services in Essex from 2017.

I am pleased to inform you that I placed a copy of the inquiry's terms of reference in the Libraries of both Houses on 24 August 2021.

This follows a consultation by the inquiry on its terms of reference which commenced on 26 May and concluded on 3 August 2021. The inquiry team reached out to and heard from affected families, patients, local

community groups, charities, and other individuals and organisations with an interest in the issues laid out in my earlier statement.

The terms of reference have also been published on the inquiry's website <https://www.emhii.org.uk/>.

[HCWS255]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Housing Delivery Test

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): The covid-19 pandemic has tested our country's resilience like nothing else has during peacetime. The public have endured great sacrifices, but access to a home—whether owned or rented—should not be one of them. Therefore, despite the unprecedented challenge facing us, we must not lose sight of the need this country has for more homes.

The Housing Delivery Test exists to offer greater transparency on the level of housing delivery in an area. It is an annual percentage measurement calculated over a rolling three-year period, taking into account the homes delivered in an area against the homes required. The Housing Delivery Test will remain a key part of the reformed planning system under proposals set out in Planning for the Future White Paper.

The 2020 Housing Delivery Test measurement used data relating to financial years 2018-19, 2019-20 and 2020-21. To respond to the disruption to local authority services and the construction sector caused by the first national lockdown in March 2020, the Government made a one-month adjustment to the 2019-20 housing requirement. Since then, the Government have been engaging closely with local authorities and the housing industry across the country and stands ready to support recovery. Ministers have been listening to our stakeholders and will continue to do so.

The 2021 Housing Delivery Test measurement will be calculated using data relating to financial years 2018-19, 2019-20 and 2020-21. Over the course of the 2020-21 measurement year, there were considerable variations in levels of housing delivery as local authorities and construction industry continued to face disruption on a national, regional and local level due to the pandemic. As a result, the Government aim to publish the 2021 Housing Delivery Test as intended later this year but will apply a four-month adjustment to the housing requirement figures for 2020-21 in order to account for these fluctuations. This means that there will be a deduction of 122 days to account for the most disrupted period that occurred between the months of April to the end of July. The thresholds for consequences for under-delivery will be maintained, as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework.

A nuance of the Housing Delivery Test is how the calculation is carried out for local authorities that undergo reorganisation to create unitary authorities. Until now, recently reorganised authorities anticipated having their Housing Delivery Test calculated at their former authority boundaries in only the first year following reorganisation.

However, from the 2021 measurement, in order to support new unitary authorities, they will be able to choose to use their former authority boundaries or their new unitary boundaries for the purpose of the measurement until the fifth anniversary of the new authority's existence. We will be updating planning guidance to reflect this. In such cases, unitary authorities will still be expected to deliver housing in line with their identified need.

This Government's ambition is to deliver 300,000 homes per year by the mid-2020s and one million homes over this Parliament. Therefore, it is vital that work continues to support and facilitate housing delivery. It will help us to build back better, support the economy to rebound strongly from the pandemic and ensure the homes needed across England are provided.

We have been making strong progress. Last year alone, around 244,000 homes were delivered—this is the highest number of new homes for over 30 years, and the seventh consecutive year that net supply has increased.

This written ministerial statement only covers England.

[HCWS254]

JUSTICE

Civil Cases: Extending Fixed Recoverable Costs

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): The Ministry of Justice is today publishing its consultation response on extending fixed recoverable costs (FRC) in civil law cases in England and Wales. This follows the 2019 consultation paper, *Extending Fixed Recoverable Costs in Civil Cases: Implementing Sir Rupert Jackson's Proposals*, which was based on the recommendations in Sir Rupert Jackson's report on FRC, published on 31 July 2017. This consultation response has been delayed, principally because of the covid-19 pandemic.

As we build back a better justice system, we continue with renewed vigour to modernise the courts and how users interact with them. One area in need of further reform is costs, and particularly those that a losing party must pay the winner. This is especially true in lower value civil claims which people and businesses are most likely to face, either as claimants or defendants. Currently, the costs of these cases are too uncertain. Without being able to predict what the costs may be, it is difficult for either side to take an informed decision on the best way forward. We want cases to be resolved as early as possible, including those that proceed to litigation, with costs that are certain, proportionate, and fair to both sides.

FRC is a way of controlling the legal costs of civil litigation in advance by prescribing the amount of money that can be recovered by the winning party at set stages of litigation. They reduce overall costs, keep them proportionate, and enhance access to justice. FRC is already an important part of our justice system in lower value personal injury cases: their extension will be of particular benefit to those of more modest means, including individuals and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and those who may otherwise be unable to litigate.

The Ministry of Justice has carefully considered the way forward in the light of responses to the consultation and developments since, including the Government's desire to extend the use of FRC in other cases not covered in this response, such as clinical negligence claims and immigration and asylum judicial reviews. As is set out in our response, we propose to extend FRC to all cases in the fast track—generally those up to a value of £25,000, and to implement a new regime for 'intermediate' cases—simpler cases between £25,000 and £100,000. We will work with the Civil Procedure Rule Committee to ensure the smooth delivery of these reforms, to be implemented over the coming year.

The case for extending FRC remains strong: uncertainty of costs hinders access to justice, whereas certainty of costs set at a proportionate and fair level enhances it.

[HCWS253]

TRANSPORT

Civil Aviation Noise: Independent Advice to Government

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): The aviation sector is vital to our future as a global trading nation as well as playing a critical role in local economies and in the Government's commitment to level up the economy. However, aviation noise can affect the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities in the vicinity of airports and underneath flightpaths.

Since the onset of the covid-19 pandemic there has been a reduction in aircraft movements in most areas, and with it a reduction in associated noise, but as the Government focus on building back better and ensuring a successful UK aviation sector for the future, aviation noise will increase from current levels. It is therefore vital that Government have appropriate and credible advice on aviation noise related matters.

The Government established the Independent Commission on Civil Aviation Noise (ICCAN) in November 2018 to help ensure that the needs of local communities are properly taken into account when considering the noise impacts of airport expansion, and to help ensure that noise impacts of airspace changes are properly considered.

Following an independent review of ICCAN conducted earlier this year, I have concluded that many of ICCAN's functions would be more efficiently performed by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), which already has a wider environmental remit. This will help ensure that noise is considered alongside other policy outcomes on the basis of high quality research and advice.

As a result, I can confirm that ICCAN will be wound down this month (September). This will be followed by a transitional phase during which my Department will work with the CAA, which will take on the majority of ICCAN's former functions from April 2022. The CAA also plans to establish a new environment panel to provide it with independent expert advice on a range of environmental issues including carbon, air quality and noise. ICCAN's existing functions not transferred to the CAA will remain within my Department.

[HCWS251]

International Travel: Summary of Updates

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):

This statement provides an update on developments on international travel and on changes to the traffic light system made over the summer recess period.

Global travel taskforce July checkpoint review

As announced on 29 July, and as part of the second global travel taskforce checkpoint review, the Government extended the policy on fully vaccinated passengers arriving from amber list countries to include those who have been vaccinated in Europe (EU member states, European Free Trade Association countries and the European microstate countries of Andorra, Monaco and Vatican City) and US residents vaccinated in the United States. These changes came into force at 4 am on 2 August and mean that amber list arrivals vaccinated in the US and in Europe no longer have to take a day 8 test or quarantine. However, they are still required to take a pre-departure test before arrival as well as a PCR test on or before day 2 after arrival.

Children (under 18s) who are ordinarily resident in the US or Europe are also exempt from quarantine and the day 8 test, the same as children ordinarily resident in the UK. Children aged 11 and over will still need to complete a pre-departure and day 2 test. Children between the ages of five and 10 will only need to complete a day 2 test, and children aged four and under do not need to take any tests.

Passengers vaccinated in Europe with a vaccine approved by the European Medicines Agency are required to provide proof via an EU digital covid certificate, and those vaccinated in the US are required to provide proof via the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention vaccination card. The policy does not currently cover those who have proof of recovery from covid-19.

Additional restrictions for France were applied on 19 July due to the persistent presence of cases in France of the beta variant. These temporary additional restrictions were removed at 4 am on 8 August and the fully vaccinated policy now applies to France.

Unvaccinated passengers, or passengers whose vaccines were not provided in the UK, Europe or United States through MHRA, EMA and FDA-approved vaccines, respectively, arriving in the UK from an amber list country are required to quarantine at home, provide a valid notification of a negative test result prior to travel and take a test on day 2 and 8 after their arrival.

The Government will explore how to expand this approach to other countries, where it is safe to do so.

Further to this, international cruises also fully restarted on 2 August. Passengers travelling on international cruises are subject to the same rules as other international passengers and should therefore follow the traffic light system. FCDO advice has been amended to encourage travellers to understand the risks associated with cruise travel and take personal responsibility for their own safety abroad.

Traffic light system review

During parliamentary recess there have been two reviews of the country allocations within the traffic light system, on 5 August and 26 August. The following countries and territories have been added to the Government's green list:

At 4 am on 8 August:	At 4 am on 30 August:
Austria	Canada
Germany	Denmark
Latvia	Finland
Norway	Liechtenstein
Romania	Lithuania
Slovakia	Switzerland
Slovenia	The Azores

Passengers arriving from green list destinations need to provide evidence of a negative covid-19 test result prior to travel and take a further test on or before day 2 of their arrival in the UK.

The following countries have been added to the amber list at 4am on 8 August:

Bahrain
India
Qatar
United Arab Emirates

The following countries and territories have been added to the red list, reflecting the increased case rates in these countries as well as presenting a high public health risk to the UK from known variants of concern:

At 4 am on 8 August:	At 4 am on 30 August:
Georgia	Montenegro
La Reunion	Thailand
Mayotte	
Mexico	

Passengers arriving from these destinations, irrespective of vaccination status, are required to self-isolate in a managed quarantine hotel, provide a valid notification of a negative test result prior to travel and take a test on day 2 and 8 after their arrival.

All arrivals into the UK must continue to complete a passenger locator form.

Managed quarantine service

From 12 August, the cost for staying in a managed quarantine facility when arriving from a red list country increased to £2,285 for a single adult and £1,430 for a second adult to better reflect the total costs involved. The price remains unchanged for children.

Testing

Testing remains an important part of ensuring safe international travel. The Government continue to work with the travel industry and private testing providers to further reduce testing costs, while ensuring travel is as safe as possible. The Government have recently reduced NHS test and trace costs for travel testing for a second time to £68 and £136 for day 2 and days 2 and 8 testing packages respectively, to send a clear signal to industry and encourage a reduction in private sector pricing.

The Health Secretary has asked the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to conduct an urgent review of private testing providers to explore whether individual PCR providers may be breaching their obligations under consumer law; to report on any structural problems in the PCR market affecting price, reliability, or service quality; and whether there are any immediate actions that the Government could take in the meantime. The

CMA has also sent and published an open letter to providers of PCR tests on how they should comply with consumer law.

On 23 August the Government also announced that, following a rapid review of the pricing and service standards of day 2 and day 8 testing providers listed on gov.uk, more than 80 companies have had their misleading prices corrected on the Government's website and given a final warning, and a further 57 firms have been removed.

The action will help ensure consumers can trust the testing providers listed on gov.uk and only the most reliable companies are available.

While public health is a devolved matter, the Government work closely with the devolved Administrations on any changes to international travel and aim to ensure a whole UK approach.

[HCWS252]

Petitions

Monday 6 September 2021

OBSERVATIONS

HOME

Police presence in Kensington

The petition of residents of the constituency of Kensington,

Declares that it is imperative that a physical police presence, that being defined as a police station with a counter, continues to be located within the boundaries of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, North of Holland Park Avenue/Notting Hill Gate; further that such a presence is needed because tackling crime in the area, particularly violent crime, poses significant challenges and the Grenfell community deserve to have a police presence; and further that a guarantee of police presence should be made as soon as reasonably possible and no later than the date set for the closure of Royalty Studios (North Kensington) Police Station.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure that a physical police presence is retained and not withdrawn from Kensington.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

—[Presented by Felicity Buchan, *Official Report*, 6 July 2021; Vol. 698, c. 856.]

[P002672]

Observations from The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):

On 4 February 2021, the Government published a total police funding settlement of up to £15.8 billion in 2021-22, an increase of up to £600 million compared with the 2020-21 settlement. From that, the Metropolitan Police Service's funding will be up to £3.1 billion in 2021-22, an increase of up to £132.4 million on the 2020-21 police funding settlement.

Decisions on how to use funding and resources are an operational matter for the Commissioner and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime who are best placed to make resourcing decisions within their communities based on their local knowledge and experience, including the management of the police estate. In doing so the Government would hope they could canvass and assess the views of the local neighbourhoods concerned.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Planning applications in Richmond Park

The petition of the residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that localist planning principles must be applied to the former Stag Brewery planning application, GLA references 4172, 4172a & 4172b and the Homebase, Manor Road planning application, GLA reference 4795; further that weakening the planning decisions made by local authorities at local level risks allowing unsuitable development, including architecturally displeasing development, environmentally damaging development, and development that is not primarily designed to meet the need of the local community; further that the former Stag Brewery planning application cannot be seen in isolation from the Homebase, Manor Road application,

the partial closure of Hammersmith Bridge and other relevant issues; further that GLA must institute a holistic approach by assessing the former Stag Brewery application and then reviewing the Homebase, Manor Road application accordingly.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government, and in particular the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government of the United Kingdom, to meet with Sarah Olney, MP for Richmond Park, to discuss the implications of the former Stag Brewery planning application and the Homebase, Manor Road planning application.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sarah Olney, *Official Report*, 22 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 1241.]

[P002685]

Observations from The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher):

The Government are committed to give more power to councils and communities to make their own decisions on planning issues and believe planning decisions should be made at the local level wherever possible.

With regard to the former Stag Brewery planning application, GLA references 4172, 4172a & 4172b, a resolution was reached at the GLA's representation hearing that the planning applications be refused.

In respect of the Homebase, Manor Road planning application, GLA reference 4795, this application was considered against the call-in policy which is set out in the written ministerial statement made on 26 October 2012 by Nick Boles. After carefully considering the issues raised, it was decided that the intervention of Ministers would not be justified, and the application therefore remains for determination by the Mayor of London.

The Government are concerned that all local authorities should administer the planning system with the utmost propriety. However, local authorities act independently of central Government. Ministers, even the Prime Minister, have no remit to intervene in the day-to-day affairs of local authorities, except where specific provision has been made in an Act of Parliament. Local authorities are accountable for their actions to their electorate and must act within their statutory powers. Therefore, I cannot comment on local authorities'—including the GLA—handling of this matter.

Due to the Secretary of State's quasi-judicial role in the planning system, it would not be appropriate to meet to discuss individual planning applications, particularly in circumstances where they remain undetermined by a local planning authority, or where proposals may be revisited and returned to in the future.

JUSTICE

Independent assessment in family courts

Petition of a resident of the United Kingdom

The petitioner Aaliyah Spence, the mother of three children who lives in England,

Declares that two of her children have bradykinin-mediated angioedema. This is a disease where the children appear to have blemishes just like bruises.

Further declares that this was first noticed when she took one of her children for medical attention. Further declares that much like the case of Sabrina Dietsch and Yoan Bombarde in France her children were then taken into care. Notes, however, that whereas in France the children were returned to their parents, in England, it is very difficult to obtain independent assessment that enables the review of her case and therefore her children remain in care. Further declares that, even though the blemishes that were thought to be bruises continued to appear whilst the children are in foster care, the local authority continues to be set on keeping control of the children. Notes that this is not in the long term interests of the children.

The petitioner therefore requests that the House of Commons refers the issue of the lack of independent assessment of expert reports in the family courts to the Justice and Education select committees for review.

And the petitioner remains, etc.— [*Official Report*, 27 May 2021; Vol. 696, c. 5P.]

[P002668]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lord Wolfson of Tredegar, QC):

There is already detailed legislation in this area which emphasises the independence of experts and the key role of judicial discretion in determining when and what area(s) of expert evidence should be put before the court.

Section 13 of the Children and Families Act 2014 makes detailed provision in relation to the control of expert evidence, and of assessments in “children proceedings” (which term includes care proceedings). Points of particular relevance to this petition are:

the court controls who is given permission to instruct an expert to provide evidence;

the court may only give that permission if “it is of the opinion that the expert evidence is necessary to enable the court to resolve the proceedings justly”; and

there are a list of factors to which the court must have particular regard, including the impact which giving permission would be likely to have on the welfare of the child, the issues to which the evidence would relate, the questions which the court would require the expert to answer and the cost of the expert evidence.

Section 13 of the Children and Families Act 2014 is underpinned by detailed rules of court practice and procedure set out in the Family Procedure Rules 2010 and the supporting Practice Directions. These rules and practice directions are developed by the Family Procedure Rule Committee, working in close conjunction with Government officials. The Committee is made up of judges and legal and lay practitioners, all of whom are experts in family law.

The Family Procedure Rules 2010 and the supporting practice directions set out a comprehensive framework. New provision in relation to experts was put in place in 2014 to support the coming into force of section 13 of the 2014 Act. Part 25 of the Family Procedure Rules 2010 provides direction regarding the use of experts and assessors in family courts.

Rule 25.3 sets out that the duty of an expert is “to help the court on matters within their expertise”, and that this “overrides any obligation” to the person instructing or paying the expert. Particular duties of an expert are set out in Practice Direction 25B (The Duties of an

Expert, the Expert’s Report and Arrangements for an Expert to Attend Court). It follows that any person giving expert evidence in family proceedings must be independent and must be in no way obliged to support a given party’s case.

The president of the family division, Sir Andrew McFarlane, established a working group to identify the scale of the problem of medical expert witness shortages in the family courts, to look at the causes and to identify possible solutions; the final report was published in October 2020. The report concluded with recommendations which suggest a number of improvements in relation to payment, court process, treatment of experts, training required and how these changes could be sustained.

Recently, the Family Justice Council co-ordinated an event aimed at medical and allied health professions, family lawyers and judiciary to encourage such experts to offer their services in family justice system.

It is evident, then, that the Government, the Family Justice Council and the Family Procedure Rule Committee continue to consider the role of the experts and independent assessors in the family court.

Sandbach Cemetery

The petition of the residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Sandbach cemetery is nearly full so future burials would take place several miles out of town; notes that a local petition calling for an extension to the cemetery land has received over 4,400 signatures.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to request Cheshire East Council to reconsider their decision not to extend burial provision in Sandbach.

And the petitioners remain etc.— [*Presented by Fiona Bruce, Official Report*, 14 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 486 .]

[P002676]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lord Wolfson of Tredegar, QC):

Burial provision is a matter for local government to determine in the context of local circumstances and priorities, and within the relevant statutory and regulatory framework. It would therefore be inappropriate for central Government to comment on, or seek to intervene in, decisions made by individual local authorities in this regard.

As there has not been consistent evidence to suggest that pressure on burial space is an issue nationally, central Government have not wanted to impose national measures where local initiatives and management can best address local issues.

The Law Commission, as part of its programme of law reform, will be considering the modernising and streamlining the law governing the disposal of human remains, with a view to putting forward a legal framework for the future. Further information on the project can be found at <https://www.lawcom.gov.uk/project/a-modern-framework-for-disposing-of-the-dead/>

TREASURY

Proposals for higher taxes on the super-rich

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that proposals to introduce higher taxes on the super-rich as a step to tackling the widespread poverty and inequality that scar our society should be

considered; further that the covid-19 pandemic has not only shone a spotlight on the huge inequalities in our society—it has deepened them; notes that in May the Sunday Times rich list revealed that Britain’s billionaires have increased their wealth by £106 billion during the pandemic—that’s £290 million per day; notes that, in contrast, a record 2.5 million food bank parcels were given to people in crisis in the past year; declares that as we come out of this pandemic, if we are to learn the lessons and build a more equal and more inclusive society, then we need to acknowledge that trickle-down economics is flawed and decades of failing tax policy must be tackled.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and review proposals to introduce a wealth tax intended to raise tens of billions from the wealthiest in our society, a windfall tax on corporations that made super-profits during the pandemic and a more progressive income tax system including a new 55% income tax rate on all income over £200,000 per year, a 50% income tax rate for those on over £123,000 and 45% rate for income over £80,000.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

—[Presented by Richard Burgon, Official Report, 21 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 1100.]

[P002683]

Observations from The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

The Government thank the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) for submitting the petition on behalf of his constituents about the tax system.

The Government are aware that the Wealth Tax Commission, which has no connection to the Government, considered the case for a wealth tax in the UK. The Wealth Tax Commission rejected the idea of an annual wealth tax for the UK, and instead proposed a one-off tax. However, it acknowledged that levying even a one-off tax would be a hugely complex undertaking, and that the amount of revenue raised would be highly dependent on the final design of the tax. The Wealth Tax Commission notes that in considering Inheritance Tax, Capital Gains Tax, Stamp Duty and Stamp Duty Land Tax, the Wealth Tax Commission found the UK is among the top G7 countries for wealth taxes as a percentage of total wealth.

The UK system is designed to ensure among other things that the richest in our society pay their fair share on their wealth and assets, with the tax system taxing wealth across many different economic activities, including acquisition, holding, transfer and disposal of assets and income derived from assets.

These tax levers generate substantial revenue, including Inheritance Tax revenues of £6 billion, Capital Gains Tax revenues of £8.7 billion and property transaction taxes of £12.3 billion (Budget 2021 forecasts for 2021-22).

The Government have also taken steps to ensure that the most well-off continue to make a fair contribution, reforming the taxation of dividends, pensions and business disposals to make the tax system fairer and more sustainable. At Budget 2021, the Government also announced it would maintain the Inheritance Tax nil-rate band, the annual exempt amount for Capital Gains Tax, and the pensions Lifetime Allowance at their 2020-21 levels until April 2026.

The Government also believe that it is right that businesses should share in the burden of restoring the public finances to a sustainable footing. That is why the Government announced an increase in the rate of Corporation Tax at Budget. The rate increase will not come into force until April 2023, by which time GDP is forecast to have recovered to its pre-pandemic level. The approach the Government have announced will help to protect the smallest businesses while raising over £45 billion over the next 5 years from a main rate at 25 per cent that is still the most competitive in the G7.

Companies with small profits, that is, those companies with profits of £50,000 or less, will continue to pay 19 per cent. That means that around 70 per cent of actively trading companies will be protected from a rate increase, that is around 1.4 million businesses. That compares to a rate of 21 per cent they were paying when the previous Government was elected in 2010. Companies with profits below £250,000 will pay less than the main rate. That means approximately 90 per cent of actively trading companies will not pay the full rate, around 1.8 million businesses.

Those companies that have made profits during the pandemic have continued to pay Corporation Tax on those profits as normal. Corporation Tax is charged in line with the level of a company’s profits so more profitable companies will have contributed more.

For similar reasons of fairness, the UK Income Tax system consists of three progressive rates of tax, which sit above an internationally high personal allowance. The top 1 per cent of income taxpayers are projected to pay 28 per cent of all Income Tax and the top 5 per cent over 48 per cent of all Income Tax in 2021-22. In April 2021, the Government increased the personal allowance to £12,570. The Government has raised the personal allowance by over 90 per cent since 2010-11, ensuring more of the lowest earners do not pay Income Tax at all.

Whilst raising the highest (Additional, currently 45p) rate of Income Tax may look attractive, HMRC’s report “Exchequer effect of the 50p rate” (March 2012) concluded that, although there is uncertainty around these estimates, the yield from the previous Additional Rate at 50p was much lower than originally forecast. HMRC estimated the 50p rate yielded less than originally forecast (yielding around £1 billion or less), and that the yield could be negative.

The Government keep all aspects of the tax system under review, and any decisions on future changes will be taken as part of the annual Budget process in the context of the wider public finances.

Santander Bath Road branch

The petition of residents of Feltham and Heston,

Declares that the Santander branch on Hounslow Bath Road should not be closed; further that access to in-person banking services is crucial to many residents in the local area; and further that residents feel that they will not have access to a comparable banking service over the phone or online and will struggle financially as a result.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ask that Santander does not close the Bath Road branch.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Seema Malhotra, *Official Report*, 14 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 486.]

[P002675]

Observations from The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The Government thank the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for submitting the petition on behalf of her constituents regarding the closure of the Santander Bath Road branch.

The Government are sorry to hear of her constituents' disappointment at the planned closure of the branch. The way consumers interact with their banking is changing. In 2020, 83% of UK adults used contactless payments, 72% used online banking and 54% used mobile banking, according to UK Finance. The Government cannot reverse the changes in the market and in customer behaviour; nor can they determine firms' commercial strategies in response to those changes. Having the flexibility to respond to changes in the market is what makes the UK's financial services sector one of the most competitive and productive in the world, and the Government want to protect that.

As with other banking service providers, Santander will need to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering its strategy. Although the Government can understand the constituents' dissatisfaction, decisions on opening and closing branches are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis. The Government hope that the hon. Member can appreciate that it would be inappropriate for the Government to intervene in these decisions.

However, the Government firmly believe that the impact of branch closures should be understood, considered, and mitigated where possible so that all customers, wherever they live, continue to have access to over the counter banking services.

As the hon. Member may know, the major high street banks signed up to the Access to Banking Standard in May 2017, which commits them to ensure customers are well informed about branch closures, the bank's reasons for closure and options for continued access to banking services. I note that in the customer information pack that Santander has published for the Bath Road closure, customers are pointed to the nearby cash machines in the Barclays branch and Maham Superstore, as well as alternative Santander branches in Hounslow (1.3 miles away) and Southall (3.4 miles away).

Alternatively, Santander customers can carry out their everyday banking at the nearby Post Office. The Post Office Banking Framework allows 95% of business and 99% of personal banking customers to carry out their everyday banking at 11,500 post office branches in the UK.

In September 2020, the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) published guidance setting out its expectation of firms when they are deciding to reduce the number of physical branches or the number of free-to-use ATMs. Firms are expected to carefully consider the impact of a planned closure on their customers' everyday banking and cash access needs and consider possible alternative access arrangements. This will ensure the implementation of closure decisions is done in a way that treats customers fairly.

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