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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES  
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HOUSE OF LORDS  
OFFICIAL REPORT

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<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Party/Group</b>
CB	Cross Bench
Con	Conservative
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
GP	Green Party
Ind Lab	Independent Labour
Ind LD	Independent Liberal Democrat
Ind SD	Independent Social Democrat
Ind UU	Independent Ulster Unionist
Lab	Labour
Lab Co-op	Labour and Co-operative Party
LD	Liberal Democrat
LD Ind	Liberal Democrat Independent
Non-afl	Non-affiliated
PC	Plaid Cymru
UKIP	UK Independence Party
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

No party affiliation is given for Members serving the House in a formal capacity, the Lords spiritual, Members on leave of absence or Members who are otherwise disqualified from sitting in the House.

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# House of Lords

Thursday 14 May 2020

11 am

*Prayers—read by the Lord Bishop of Durham in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

## Arrangement of Business

*Announcement*

11.04 am

*The announcement was made in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

**The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler):** My Lords, Virtual Proceedings of the House of Lords will now begin. I remind Members of the House that these proceedings are subject to parliamentary privilege and what we say is available to the public both in *Hansard* and to those listening and watching. Members' microphones will initially be set to mute, and the broadcasting team will unmute their microphones shortly before we reach their place in the speakers' list. When Members have finished speaking, their microphones will again be set to mute.

I ask everyone to keep questions and answers as brief as possible so that we can get through as many of those on the list as is possible. Virtual Proceedings on Oral Questions will now commence.

## British Citizens Stranded Overseas

*Question*

11.05 am

*Asked by Baroness Northover*

To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have for bringing back British citizens who are stranded overseas as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

*The Question was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

**The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for International Development (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) (Con):** My Lords, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is leading efforts to repatriate British travellers and their families who normally live in the United Kingdom. On 30 March, the Foreign Secretary committed £75 million for charter flights where commercial routes are not an option, prioritising the most vulnerable. We have now brought back more than 31,000 people on 146 flights from 27 countries, organised by the Foreign Office. More than 19,000 British passengers who were aboard 60 cruise ships on 17 March have all disembarked.

**Baroness Northover (LD):** My Lords, I thank the noble Lord for all his and the FCO's work. However, by early April, the EU had brought home half a million citizens. Under the EU scheme, Germany had

chartered more than 100 flights for 20,000 citizens; the UK had chartered only six for 1,000 people. Why did the UK not play a full part in what the EU offered, and are we doing so now? I note that there has just been an EU flight back from the Gambia.

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness for her remarks about the work of the Foreign Office. The teams both in London and in post have been working around the clock on the repatriation effort. We have taken the view that it is right to keep commercial flight options open, which has resulted in a larger number of British nationals—for example, in Pakistan—returning. Where there have been no commercial flights, we have then embarked on charter options. I believe that that was the right decision and we have had a successful operation which continues today.

**Baroness Fookes (Con):** I have two friends who have been stranded in South Africa since late March. Offers of flights by British Airways have been repeatedly cancelled. Will my noble friend put pressure on BA or arrange government transport to get them and many others home?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** My noble friend is right to raise the important issue of South Africa. We have run flights from there and we have considered, and continue to consider, further options. I am aware of cases in South Africa; my honourable friend the Minister for Africa, James Duddridge, is prioritising flights in that respect.

**Baroness Coussins (CB):** My Lords, does the Minister know how many UK citizens employed by the British Council and based overseas may need to be brought home as a result of the council's operations closing down because they are financially unsustainable as a result of Covid-19? Is he aware that the British Council risks having to close altogether unless additional emergency funding can be provided?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** I am fully aware of the challenges which have been imposed on many networks, including the British Council. We have brought back diplomats and staff of the British Council because of the health situation or lack of flights in certain parts of the world. I shall write to the noble Baroness on the specific numbers.

**Lord Hain (Lab):** My Lords, I know that Foreign Office staff and Ministers have been working hard, but does the Minister agree that the savage cuts in the Foreign Office's budget these last 10 years have contributed to the shambles of returning our citizens? One operator had to hire a private jet to return 10 Brits stranded in Turkey because all the Foreign Office could offer was to get them to Minsk. Why is Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe still so shamefully stranded in Covid-infested Tehran?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** I do not agree with the noble Lord. We have had a massive effort, and I pay tribute to our network. The noble Lord will recall that

[LORD AHMAD OF WIMBLEDON]

the Prime Minister, as Foreign Secretary, embarked on an ambitious programme to increase the number of posts, and our diplomats have served us with great aplomb.

We are acutely aware of the situation of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and continue to lobby for her permanent release. We have been encouraged by her release on 17 March and its extension, but we continue to make representations to the Iranian Government to make her release permanent so that she can be returned home to the UK and reunited with her family and loved ones.

**Lord Campbell of Pittenweem (LD):** My Lords, is the Minister aware that some estimates of the number of British citizens still requiring repatriation are around 300,000? Why do the Government not charter some of the aircraft parked up all over the south of England, put some money into the pockets of the airlines and get all of our citizens still abroad who want to return to the United Kingdom back here once and for all?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** As the noble Lord will be aware, we have opened up registration procedures in all our posts. For example, in the places that I cover, including Pakistan, we have returned all British nationals who were registered and who sought to return. We continue to operate charter flights. It has been a successful programme, as I said, across 27 countries, and we continue to monitor the situation. If British nationals are concerned, they should get in touch with the embassy or high commission, register their need to return and we will seek to facilitate it at the earliest opportunity.

**Baroness Falkner of Margravine (Non-Aff):** I too thank the Minister for the efforts of Foreign Office staff around the world. I was stranded after the tsunami, and I well know what a sterling job they do. My question is about EU nationals who may be using UK flights to come into the UK in order to go home. Once quarantine comes in, will those people be expected to quarantine for 14 days in the UK? Likewise, where EU carriers are bringing home British nationals into countries which are imposing quarantines, will British nationals be required to quarantine in those countries, for example, Spain? At whose expense would that be?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** The noble Baroness raises an important point on repatriation, and I thank her for her kind remarks. We have worked with EU nations, our partner countries, as well as with other countries in the repatriation efforts. We have brought back some of their citizens, and they have brought back British nationals. On the proposed introduction of the quarantine in the United Kingdom at the end of this month, the details are still being determined; I will of course share them with noble Lords once they have been made clear. We will make sure that this is communicated to all nationals returning to the UK or via the UK.

**Baroness McIntosh of Pickering (Con):** My Lords, I congratulate my noble friend the Minister and the Foreign Office team on what has been a massive effort. Can he assure me and the country that there are no

stranded passengers on cruise ships who were caught out? Can he explain why it seems that the Foreign Office advice was slow to change, allowing cruise ship passengers to depart from the United Kingdom for often far-flung destinations and leaving them stranded when the quarantine was reaching its peak?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** I thank my noble friend for her kind remarks. On repatriation, particularly from cruises, rest assured that we have returned all British nationals, as I said in my original Answer. It has been a massive exercise, but a successful one. On the travel advice, we were of course guided by medical advice and ensured that British nationals could continue to travel until it was necessary to impose limitations, which the Foreign Secretary did. We continue to review that travel advice going forward.

**Viscount Waverley (CB):** Following the point raised by the noble Lord, Lord Campbell, airfields are currently full of aircraft and abundant air staff are furloughed. What justification exists for the inability to requisition repatriation capacity and capability at neutral cost to the taxpayer? Does a global co-ordination unit exist to share the practicalities of repatriation? If so, from where is it managed?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** The noble Viscount raises two questions. On the point made by him and the noble Lord, Lord Campbell, anyone who works within the charter sphere will know that this is not a free-for-all. Manifests have to be determined and air traffic has to be allowed for. Equally, airspace in various parts of the world has been closed, and we have been working under extremely challenging circumstances. On a central command centre, that has been operating through the Foreign Office. As I said earlier, we have seen a very successful repatriation effort.

**Lord Collins of Highbury (Lab):** The Foreign Secretary announced on Monday a special fund for those stranded, to help with food, accommodation and other essential items. Yesterday, when I checked the UK Government website, it still said that assistance was limited to travel. Can the Minister tell us when and how people will be told about this new fund? Is it a loan or a grant?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** It is a loan which the noble Lord has asked about. It has been rolled out as a pilot exercise in four countries. We hope to announce the more general rollout in the coming days and weeks.

**The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler):** My Lords, I regret that the time allowed for this Question has elapsed.

## Housing and Construction Sector Question

11.16 am

Asked by **Baroness Neville-Rolfe**

To ask Her Majesty's Government when they will lift all of the restrictions in place on the housing and construction sectors as a result of COVID-19.

*The Question was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

**The Minister of State, Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Lord Greenhalgh) (Con):** My Lords, reopening the housing market and starting construction are mission-critical for our economy. Yesterday, the Government announced a plan to enable people to move home safely and to restart the housing market. This included new guidance to allow extended working hours on construction sites and help for the planning system to operate remotely, alongside the launch of a joint safe-working charter with the Home Builders Federation, supporting homebuilders to return to work safely; 100 separate organisations have signed up to this charter.

**Baroness Neville-Rolfe (Con):** My Lords, this is a lucky day for me and for my noble friend the new Minister on the occasion of his first Oral Question. My Question, tabled a month ago, has been magically answered by some very welcome easing of Covid-related restrictions on homes and construction. I congratulate the Government on both. With so many people staying at home, and light traffic nationwide, does the Minister agree that now is the time to accelerate work on major construction projects and digital networks, and to push for the completion of 300,000 new homes a year?

**Lord Greenhalgh:** I thank my noble friend for my first Oral Question. I agree with her sentiments. Obviously, this has to be done safely. We know that building 100,000 new homes contributes 1% of GDP. We also know that the construction sector employs 3.2 million people. We want to push ahead as safely as possible within Public Health England guidance.

**Lord Kennedy of Southwark (Lab Co-op):** My Lords, can the Minister tell the House what discussions he or his colleagues have had with the construction industry to satisfy themselves that there are adequate supplies of PPE, and that the supply chain for PPE is robust and will not fail, so as to allow greater numbers of construction workers to return to work safely, without putting themselves or their families at an unacceptable risk of becoming infected with Covid-19?

**Lord Greenhalgh:** I thank the noble Lord for his Question. It is absolutely critical that construction work happens in a safe environment. The announcement yesterday of extending construction hours was precisely to do that—to enable travelling to work at times when public transport would not be busy. Also, there are very clear guidelines on how to carry out construction. Those are jointly agreed by the Home Builders Federation and the Government, and they include the appropriate use of personal protective equipment.

**Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb (GP):** The figures from the Office for National Statistics show that construction workers have a higher fatality rate even than health professionals. There is clearly not enough personal protective equipment on sites, nor enough understanding of physical distancing. Does the Minister

not agree that this move by the Government is reckless, in sacrificing construction workers and their families to this awful disease?

**Lord Greenhalgh:** The noble Baroness points out that low-skilled workers in construction have a slightly higher death rate per 100,000, at 25.9 deaths per 100,000. However, we are not sure whether it is their occupation that is the causation. We obviously have an association, and I think we need to be careful and review the situation on an ongoing basis. That is why we have very clear guidelines that need to be followed to ensure that construction can happen safely.

**Lord Randall of Uxbridge (Con):** My noble friend will be aware that some construction projects have continued despite the pandemic, not least HS2. As he is talking about the importance of safety and health, can he urgently look into the consistent serious breaches of self-distancing by HS2 contractors, not only on-site but in local shops and on public transport?

**Lord Greenhalgh:** I thank my noble friend for that question. I will take it away and ensure that, where there are breaches in social distancing, we take it up with the appropriate authorities, and I will look specifically at HS2.

**Lord Stunell (LD):** The government guidelines this week are very welcome indeed, but they are silent about the need for Covid testing for construction workers, and they do not say too much about the availability of hygiene and sanitary products either. Can the Minister give an assurance that it is possible for the construction industry to open and function, and to draw down on tests and equipment, without putting at risk the NHS or the care home sector, which is clearly pressing hard on the same issues?

**Lord Greenhalgh:** I thank the noble Lord for his question. I will work with ministerial colleagues to provide the appropriate guidance and ensure that there is availability of both personal protective equipment and testing to enable construction work to be carried out safely.

**Lord Pickles (Con):** My Lords, the housing market will need a steady and sustained recovery. A vital ingredient of that is the supply of sites. There are worrying reports that some planning authorities are not planning to open until July. With the necessary social distancing and technology, a target of getting planning authorities up and running by the end of the month would seem reasonable. Similarly, in order to address the backlog of planning inquiries, and the very welcome news that some are now about to start virtually, can this be extended further? In lieu of that, would it be possible to extend the number of inquiries considered on a temporary basis by written representation?

**Lord Greenhalgh:** I thank my noble friend for his question. Yesterday, the Secretary of State set out the Government's expectations that the vast majority of hearings and other events are to take place virtually by

[LORD GREENHALGH]

mid-June, and that those involved in the planning process should work proactively to support this. I also take the point that this can be done virtually and by written representation, and I will take that up with the Secretary of State—particularly the point about written representation. On appeals, the Planning Inspectorate held its first digital hearing on 11 May, and the objective is for it to scale that up within a matter of weeks and to do all appeals virtually.

**Lord Best (CB):** My Lords, the Government were right to introduce a ban on evictions at this time of sudden job losses and income reductions when rent arrears are inevitable, but the ban is due to end next month. Can the Minister tell the House whether that ban on evictions will be extended, to prevent a wave of evictions later this year? Have the Government considered the Spanish Government's scheme to prevent grounds for eviction by enabling tenants to pay off arrears with interest-free loans spread over several years?

**Lord Greenhalgh:** I thank the noble Lord for his question and for pointing to the intervention by the Spanish Government, which we will look into. The Government's immediate priority has been to ensure that no one was at risk of being forced out of their home during this crisis, which was achieved through legislation and the stay on possession proceedings. These protections run in parallel to the unprecedented package of employee support and the £7 billion boost to the welfare system, which have sought to minimise the risk of tenants falling into arrears. Any tenant facing financial hardship should explore the support available through the enhanced welfare system. The government guidance for landlords and tenants sends a clear message that all should work together in good faith and investigate all solutions to overcome rent arrears, such as an affordable repayment programme, before eviction proceedings begin. The Government will, when the time is right, consider making changes on how best to support renters in both the private and social sectors through the recovery period.

**Lord McNicol of West Kilbride (Lab):** I welcome the Minister to his first Oral Questions. With the biggest economic crisis about to hit the UK, what plans have the Government put in place to ensure that the construction industry has all the tools necessary to lead us through and out of this crisis, and what conversations, if any, have taken place with the relevant trade unions and the TUC?

**Lord Greenhalgh:** I will look into the engagement with trade unions and write to the noble Lord on that matter. There have been a number of engagements with the Construction Leadership Council, and in my introductory remarks I mentioned the joint undertaking with the national Home Builders Federation, which provides guidelines on safe working practices for construction.

**The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler):** My Lords, sadly, the time allowed for that Question has elapsed, so we now come on to the third Oral Question.

## Prisons: Overcrowding Question

11.26 am

Asked by **Baroness Humphreys**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to alleviate overcrowding in prisons in England and Wales, particularly in HMP Swansea.

*The Question was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

**The Advocate-General for Scotland (Lord Keen of Elie) (Con):** My Lords, the prison estate is kept under review to ensure sufficient capacity. We have committed to invest up to £2.5 billion to create 10,000 additional prison places. We have recently opened 2,106 prison places at HM Prison Berwyn, and 206 at HM Prison Stocken. We are constructing new prisons at the former HM Prison Wellingborough and HM Prison Glen Parva sites.

**Baroness Humphreys (LD):** At the end of March, Welsh prisons held 6% of the England and Wales prison population. However, according to MoJ figures on 24 April, they had 25% of confirmed Covid-19 cases across the estate. I understand that this figure is the result of a minor reporting error and has been removed from the MoJ website, but we need clarity on what is happening in Welsh prisons. Will the noble and learned Lord outline now, or in a further letter to me, the joint strategy of the MoJ and the Welsh Government with regard to prisons in Wales?

**Lord Keen of Elie:** The noble Baroness is right that some data has been removed to be reviewed by NHS Wales. As regards the prisons and cells, we are following a strategy in all prisons in England and Wales which involves ensuring that we have separate isolation for any prisoners displaying Covid symptoms, separate isolation for those in a shielding unit—that is, for prisoners identified by healthcare staff as particularly vulnerable should they come into contact with the virus—and what is termed a reverse cohorting unit, to ensure that those coming into the prison population are isolated for 14 days to give an opportunity for any symptoms to develop. As regards the statistics for prisons as between England and Wales and Wales itself, as of Tuesday 12 May, 401 prisoners had tested positive for Covid-19 across 74 prisons, and 501 prison staff had tested positive across 70 prisons. Of those, as at 11 May, 81 prisoners had tested positive in Welsh prisons and 61 prison staff had tested positive in Welsh prisons.

**The Lord Bishop of Gloucester:** My Lords, the World Health Organization has been clear that testing will be a key part of tackling coronavirus. We just heard some of those stats, but could the Government please give us the number of prisoners who have been tested to date, and give an assurance that testing will always be in place before moving people between prisons?

**Lord Keen of Elie:** My Lords, Gold Command has taken control of the movement of prisoners, which is extremely limited between prisons. Where it happens,

that cohort is dealt with in the same way as new prisoners, so they are isolated for a period to see whether they become symptomatic. On testing, prison officers and attendant staff are key workers in the present circumstances. We have referred something like 3,000 prison officers and staff for testing. For prisoners, some who have become symptomatic may be subject to testing in prison, but otherwise there is no testing.

**Lord Davies of Gower (Con):** My Lords, Swansea prison houses twice the number of prisoners it was designed for in the mid-19th century. A Welsh Affairs Select Committee inquiry into prison provision last year heard evidence that between 2013 and 2018 there was a 475% increase in the number of drug crimes in Welsh prisons compared with a 200% increase in English prisons. One of the key challenges faced was violent behaviour caused by the drug Spice, which is exacerbated by overcrowding. Evidence was heard about the intention of the then Prisons Minister to introduce scanners in some prisons by August, which were expected to be running in all Welsh prisons by December 2019. Can my noble and learned friend confirm that these have now been installed and are operational in all Welsh prisons?

**Lord Keen of Elie:** My Lords, my noble friend makes a very good point as regards Swansea prison. It is one of our Victorian prisons and, as such, has a large number of cells that are certified to hold two prisoners, and indeed some which are certified to hold three. As of 1 May this year, the operational capacity of HMP Swansea was reduced from 479 to 396, with a prison population of about 379. Nevertheless, that can still be regarded as crowded accommodation because of the number of cells that are certified to hold two prisoners. We recognise that this is a challenge not only in Swansea but in many other local prisons from the Victorian era. On drug testing, I cannot confirm that such equipment has been rolled out in all prisons in England and Wales, but I will take steps to confirm the position and will advise my noble friend.

**Lord Ramsbotham (CB):** My Lords, to ease overcrowding, the Government have said that they would release some prisoners early. Can the Minister tell the House how many have actually been released?

**Lord Keen of Elie:** First, we have made provision to ensure that we did not come up to capacity in our prisons, but we did not commit to releasing a set number of prisoners. In the event, given developments in jury trials in Crown Courts and magistrates' courts, since mid-March we have seen a significant fall in the number of prisoners. As regards the emergency release provisions that were announced and to which the noble Lord referred, the position as at 12 May this year is that 21 pregnant women or mothers have been removed from mother and baby units, five extremely vulnerable prisoners have been released, and 57 prisoners have been released under the end of custody temporary release scheme, giving a total of 83 releases under the scheme.

**Lord Judd (Lab):** Can the Minister confirm that the central plank of government penal policy is rehabilitation because it makes economic sense, while the cost of not successfully rehabilitating becomes very heavy to society?

In that context, will he explain how keeping prisoners in humiliating and degrading conditions can possibly assist in the process of rehabilitation? Is getting these things right not urgent if we are sincere about saving the nation money by not having a high rate of reoffending?

**Lord Keen of Elie:** The noble Lord is quite right: rehabilitation is one of the central pillars of our policy with regard to prisons. That has been made extremely difficult by reason of the Covid pandemic. It has been necessary to limit the movement of prisoners within prisons in order to contain the Covid threat. It has been necessary to curtail rehabilitation schemes and education schemes. That is extremely unfortunate, but we hope that, as soon we are beyond the Covid issue, we will be able to return to the schemes we have in place for rehabilitation.

**Lord German (LD):** My Lords, given the continued spread of coronavirus among prison staff and prisoners, the lock-in of prisoners for months ahead preventing training for rehabilitation, the number of prisons which, like Wrexham, are designed for two to a cell, and the increase of prisoners held on remand while jury trials are stopped, can the Minister explain why the Government's early release scheme has ground to a trickle of just 57 out of the 4,000 announced by the Secretary of State in the other place, as overcrowding is seeding this pandemic?

**Lord Keen of Elie:** As I indicated, in all our prisons we have introduced a cohorting strategy that ensures separation and isolation between prisoners displaying Covid-19 symptoms and other prisoners; a shielding unit for those who are vulnerable to contact with the virus; and a reverse cohorting unit to ensure that new prisoners are isolated for a suitable period until they are found not to be exhibiting symptoms. That continues. With regard to the number of cases within prisons, I think I indicated before that the present position as of 12 May is that we have 401 prisoners who have tested positive for Covid-19 across 74 prisons, and 501 prison staff who have tested positive across 70 prisons. The noble Lord will notice that there is a greater number of prison staff than prisoners who have tested positive. We continue to maintain a system of social separation and hand washing and, where necessary, PPE is available to staff.

**The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler):** I call the noble and learned Lord, Lord Mackay of Clashfern. No? I regret that we did not get through many supplementaries on that Question, but the time has now elapsed and we will move on to the fourth Oral Question.

## Covid-19: Testing Question

11.37 am

*Asked by The Earl of Clancarty*

To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to introduce mass testing of the population using the COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction test; and what role any such plans will have in the lifting of restrictions in place to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

*The Question was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Lord Bethell) (Con):** My Lords, testing is a critical part of the Government's test and trace programme. It will enable the UK to start to come out of some elements of lockdown. We salute the efforts and innovation of our NHS, public health and private sector partners. Their hard work will bring forward the easing of important restrictions that keep people safe and protect our NHS.

**The Earl of Clancarty (CB):** My Lords, public health specialists have been worried from the beginning of this crisis that a large-scale nationwide test, trace and isolate infrastructure was not straightaway put in place. I did not hear the word "isolate" in the Minister's reply. Will the Government yet set this up, perhaps headed by an independent epidemiologist? To that end, will they address the concern that commercial lab test results are not reaching councils and the local NHS so that proper action can be taken to isolate and eradicate this virus across all communities before lockdown is substantially eased?

**Lord Bethell:** My Lords, I pay tribute to Public Health England, which stood up the CTAS system that provided track and trace services at the beginning of the epidemic. I pay tribute to Dido Harding, the track and trace director whose appointment was announced earlier this week. I pay tribute to Professor John Newton, who provides scientific guidance and co-ordination for the track and trace programme.

**Lord Wood of Anfield (Lab):** My Lords, we have seen from the Covid outbreak at a nightclub in South Korea that speed is of the essence in ensuring an effective test, trace and isolate strategy. However, given the limited availability of test kits and the fact that it can take three to four days to process them, and in the light of the fact that what the Government called "operational issues" led last week to 50,000 tests being sent for analysis to the US, can we really be confident that the tests can produce sufficiently timely information to form the basis for a test, trace and isolate strategy?

**Lord Bethell:** The noble Lord is entirely right. Speed is essential and the South Korea example is a good one. More than half of our tests are turned around within 24 hours. I pay tribute to the track and trace team, who handled an extremely complex and difficult laboratory failure last weekend and used innovation to turn around 50,000 tests, the results of which were reliably given to people. However, we will continue to work on shortening the result times and getting the information back speedily so that isolation can happen in a thorough way.

**Baroness Barker (LD):** What is the average time between a swab being taken and a patient getting the result, and what is the average time for that test result to show up in national tracking data?

**Lord Bethell:** The average times are not at my disposal, but I reassure the noble Baroness that more than half the results are turned around within 24 hours.

Our target time is currently 48 hours and the vast majority of tests are done within that time. As the noble Lord, Lord Wood, rightly said, speed is of the essence, and we are working hard to compress those times.

**Baroness Rawlings (Con):** My Lords, testing and tracking are vital in working towards the lifting of restrictions. Can the Minister therefore consider looking at encouraging people to keep a daily diary on everyone they meet, wherever they go outside their home? Should they fall ill with Covid-19, that would provide a simple, easy way to trace the source of further testing?

**Lord Bethell:** My noble friend Lady Rawlings is entirely right: we all have an important role to play. There is good evidence that personal tracing by individuals of contacts within their networks has a powerful role to play in isolating those who might have been in contact with the virus. Defeating this virus will be the responsibility of everyone in the community; we cannot rely just on digital apps and central databases.

**Lord Patel (CB):** My Lords, what evidence do the Government use to calculate the value of R0?

**Lord Bethell:** The noble Lord will know that we have set up one of the most ambitious surveys, conducted by the ONS, to study on a weekly basis a large number of viral and serological tests. Those are used by statisticians to understand both the prevalence and the spread of the disease. Figures for that are emerging—we now have three weeks-worth of figures. They are being published regularly and I would be glad to send the noble Lord a link to the relevant data.

**Baroness Thornton (Lab):** My question is relevant to what has been in the news today concerning antibody testing. PCR testing is the most reliable but most resource-intensive test. Will it ever be sufficiently scalable for widespread regular testing of all key workers and to track clusters of reinfection? Are the Government investigating the potential of increasing the reliability of antibody testing by double testing? Now that a range of tests is being manufactured globally, will the Government publish their assessment of their relative efficacy in testing the two relevant antibodies?

**Lord Bethell:** The noble Baroness is entirely right. PCR testing is an important guide as to who has the virus, and we have made it available to all key workers who exhibit symptoms. However, we are sceptical of whole-population surveys. Double testing might help if there is damage to serological equipment, but the challenges of serological testing are more to do with the blood, and unfortunately people do not change their blood. We are very proud of British universities, which regularly publish assessments of the various serological approaches. That work is under way and continues, and we hope to make more progress on it in the months ahead.

**Lord Hussain (LD):** My Lords, all the evidence shows that BME communities are suffering disproportionately more from Covid-19. Many of them work on the front line as doctors, nurses, care workers, cleaners, porters



and hospital security staff, who deal directly with difficult people. Can the Minister assure the House that these front-line staff will be prioritised and tested frequently for Covid-19? In asking this question, I declare an interest, as a close family member works in hospital security.

**Lord Bethell:** My Lords, I pay tribute to those BME workers on the front line. There is no doubt that their courage and bravery in the face of heightened risk is one of the things that has kept the NHS and our care service working and we owe them a huge debt. That debt will be paid by providing testing for anyone who needs it. To answer the noble Lord's specific question, we started rolling out asymptomatic testing throughout the NHS and care service last week. The results of that will be published by the NHS shortly.

**Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick (Non-Affl):** My Lords, the Minister will be aware that, to be effective, testing in care homes of residents and staff needs to be done continuously. Can he confirm when this testing system will be established and then achieved?

**Lord Bethell:** Testing in care homes is absolutely a number one priority. We have massively ramped up testing: we are now running it at 30,000 tests a day. We will test 300,000 care home residents and 500,000 care home staff before mid-June. That will make a massive difference, but we will not stop there. The ongoing and regular testing of both residents and staff will be a core part of our test and trace programme.

**Lord Cormack (Con):** My Lords, with the encouraging announcement of the ending of virtual proceedings in the other place and in the hope that we will not be too far behind, can my noble friend assure me that adequate, permanent testing facilities will be available for all who work in the Palace of Westminster and all Members of both Houses?

**Lord Bethell:** My Lords, workplace testing for not just Peers but all workers is an important part of our return-to-work strategy. We need to work with employers of all kinds and the diagnostics industry to put in solutions so that people can go back to work with confidence that they are not infectious and that the person sitting next to them is not infected.

**Baroness Finlay of Llandaff (CB):** My Lords, what national policy control mechanisms will be used to monitor and report on false negatives and false positives as testing is rolled out to complement a contact tracing app?

**Lord Bethell:** I did not hear all the question, but I think I understand what the noble Baroness is asking. The truth is that, however strong the sensitivity of the machines, false negatives and false positives are an inevitable part of the testing process. However, PHE conducts extremely thorough validation processes so that these are kept to a minimum and we will use algorithms to ensure that rogue test results are picked up as soon as possible.

**The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler):** My Lords, the time allowed for this Question has elapsed. We got through nine questions on this Question, which is very good. I thank noble Lords. That concludes the Virtual Proceedings on Oral Questions. The Virtual Proceedings will resume at noon for a Private Notice Question on testing in care homes.

11.49 am

*Virtual Proceeding suspended.*

## Care Homes: Covid-19 Testing

### *Private Notice Question*

12.01 pm

*Tabled by Baroness Wheeler*

To ask Her Majesty's Government which department or non-departmental public body is responsible for the programme of COVID-19 testing in care homes in England; and when they expect all care homes to be offered COVID-19 tests.

*The Question was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Lord Bethell) (Con):** My Lords, I assure the House that the provision of tests for care home staff and patients is a number one priority for the Department of Health and Social Care. We are currently making available 30,000 tests a day through satellite, mobile and at-home channels. By early June we aim to have offered tests to all care home residents and staff specialising in the care of older people and those living with dementia.

**Baroness Wheeler (Lab):** My Lords, the Minister will be aware that there have been stark warnings from across the sector that, unless testing of staff and residents in care homes is urgently and significantly improved, there could be a second peak in deaths, potentially coinciding with the autumn flu season. Lives are being put at risk and conditions for dementia sufferers have worsened because of the continued failure to test hundreds of thousands of staff and residents. While the DHSC, the CQC and Public Health England will squabble over who is responsible and what each has or has not done, the Government's own recovery strategy document now admits that they cannot even guarantee that every care home will be offered testing until 6 June, so we have yet another false and misleading promise. The Government themselves admit that only tens of thousands of tests have so far been done in care homes, and over 1.5 million are needed to cover staff and residents. Will the Minister explain to the House how he plans to get to grips with the total and tragic chaos that currently prevails?

**Lord Bethell:** My Lords, I completely acknowledge the threat of a second peak. It focuses the mind and is very much a priority for the Government, but there is no squabble of the kind the noble Baroness describes.

I pay tribute to colleagues at the CQC, Public Health England, the NHS and the private care providers with which we work. Care home testing is offered to all care home staff and patients who need it. We are prioritising those who ask for it first and working through the list for any who need it by early June.

**Lord Ribeiro (Con):** My Lords, given the press briefing by Dr Jenny Harries on Wednesday 13 May, when can we expect testing of all residents and staff in care homes? Covid-19 infects older people in care homes at different times. Therefore, a test is valid only on a specific day. Do the Government understand that one test per resident is not enough? Repeat tests are often required. Can my noble friend the Minister say what steps have been taken to increase the number of tests in care homes to save lives?

**Lord Bethell:** The noble Lord is correct: it is one test per resident for each infection. I pay tribute to the many care homes which have no infection at all, which have applied the correct disciplines and systems and for which no demand for the tests is currently present. We are prioritising homes that have infection and working through all their residents and staff, offering second and regular testing until the infection is eradicated. That logical prioritisation is exactly the right way to use the resources of both time and supplies, which are necessarily limited.

**Lord Whitty (Lab):** My Lords, I welcome the Minister's reassurances, but is it not the case that this Question had to be asked because it was not clear whether the issue in care homes was a priority at the beginning of this crisis? That is shown by both the release of hospital patients into care homes and the failure to provide testing and PPE for their staff and residents. Was it true that the list of priority sectors at the beginning of this crisis did not include care homes?

**Lord Bethell:** My Lords, it is not true that the list of priorities did not include care homes. In every epidemic, care homes are always a priority. History has taught us that and we knew it from the beginning. We have focused on them enormously; that is why care homes are a number one priority at the moment. We are determined to reduce the rate of infection so that infection does not leak into the community.

**Baroness Brinton (LD):** In a reply during Oral Questions earlier today to my noble friend Lady Barker, the Minister said that test results for the care sector are turned around within 48 hours. Yesterday, care home organisations told the APPG for Adult Social Care that many are not getting any results back—a big black hole—that those which do say that 10 days is not unusual, and that local resilience forums are not being allowed to get the results either. They cannot plan support. While 6 June is three weeks away, the crisis in our homes is now. Given his previous Answer, can the Minister give a date by which all care sector results will be returned within two to three days?

**Lord Bethell:** I think the noble Baroness casts the situation unfairly. There are undoubtedly cases where test results have taken longer. Last weekend, a laboratory

let us down and we had some delays, but I pay tribute to the team who turned around a very difficult situation. By far the vast majority of tests are turned around within our target time, and we are currently trying to reduce that time by using mobile and satellite units to take the tests to residents. That work is showing great and encouraging signs of improvement.

**Lord Laming (CB):** My Lords, will the Minister assure us that the department accepts that residential care homes exist for those who suffer from multiple and serious health problems? That being so, can he help us understand better why, when we have known for months that Covid-19 was a severe threat to residents and staff, it is still not possible to guarantee either testing or essential equipment?

**Lord Bethell:** I completely acknowledge that one of the most horrible aspects of this disease is that it targets those who are most vulnerable and live closely to each other. Care homes are therefore a priority. I also acknowledge that we started with a very low base of diagnostic testing and have had to work extremely hard to build that up. But now that that capacity is there, we are focusing it on care homes and using innovative methods to get those tests directly to people. We could not be working harder to get the right people tested in the care home sector.

**Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle (GP):** NHS England recommends to staff that if they have symptoms after a negative coronavirus swab test they do not return to work, given the estimates of false negatives of up to 30%. But the Government's official advice to someone with a negative test, in *Our Plan to Rebuild*, says:

"If a negative test is returned, then isolation is no longer required."

What is the Minister's advice to care home workers after a negative coronavirus swab test?

**Lord Bethell:** No one working in the NHS should go to work if they feel ill or have a temperature. That is true for anyone working on the front line, but it is not necessarily true for people who work in normal workplaces.

**Baroness Altmann (Con):** Is my noble friend aware of the guidance released to the NHS on 24 April announcing that all residents of care homes must be tested before admission? In paragraph 1.30, the guidance specifically states that:

"Where a test result is still awaited, the patient will be discharged and pending the result, isolated in the same way as a COVID-positive patient will be".

Even now, this has resulted in care homes being required to take people out of hospital without knowing whether they have the virus and without necessarily having the appropriate PPE.

**Lord Bethell:** I am aware of that guidance. It is sensible guidance. It is necessary to free beds in our NHS hospitals to make them available to those who need them more. It is also necessary to isolate people when we are not sure whether they have Covid. These are

uncomfortable truths and I do not deny that this will result in uncomfortable outcomes for some patients. One aspect of the disease is that it targets care homes and I make no apology for those arrangements.

**Lord Hain (Lab):** Following the question asked by the noble Baroness, Lady Altmann, why in an English care home where a close relative of mine lives do staff and patients—including, astonishingly, patients discharged from hospital—still have to wait up to 21 days for the results of their Covid-19 tests?

**Lord Bethell:** The noble Lord gives powerful personal testimony. I cannot possibly argue with the details of his story, but I reassure him that the data I have is that the turnaround time for tests is, in the vast majority of cases, radically less than what he described. We are on course for hitting the target of 48 hours for a very large number of tests and 24 hours for a lot of tests.

**The Senior Deputy Speaker (Lord McFall of Alcluith):** My Lords, the time allowed for this Question has elapsed. The Virtual Proceedings will now adjourn until a convenient point after 1 pm for the Motion in the name of Baroness Boycott. Proceedings in the Chamber will be taken at a convenient point after 12.30 pm.

12.12 pm

*Virtual Proceeding suspended.*

## Business of the House

### *Motion to Agree*

12.30 pm

*Moved by Baroness Evans of Bowes Park*

That until further order Private Notice Questions asked in a Virtual Proceeding shall be time limited to 15 minutes not 10.

**The Lord Privy Seal (Baroness Evans of Bowes Park) (Con):** My Lords, at Monday's meeting of the Procedure Committee, it was agreed that the time limit that applies to Private Notice Questions should be increased from 10 minutes to 15 minutes. This Motion gives effect to that decision. The Procedure Committee has updated and reissued its guidance on Virtual Proceedings, and I urge all noble Lords to read through it. One of the main updates is to when speakers' lists will close. For all types of business, speakers' lists will close earlier, so I once again urge noble Lords to look at the guidance.

The Procedure Committee continues to keep our current working practices under review. Many noble Lords have asked about a hybrid House and remote voting. The House authorities, the Procedure Committee and the commission are working through these issues at pace and will update the House in due course. Both will be introduced as soon as practically possible after the Whitsun Recess. The administration has just started collecting the additional information that it needs from Members to facilitate the rollout of remote voting, and noble Lords will receive an email within the next 24 hours inviting them to complete an online form to help with this work. I beg to move.

**Lord Adonis (Lab):** My Lords, we are very grateful for the work of the Procedure Committee and the Leader and, once again, the officials of the House. The team in Millbank is doing absolutely sterling work in bringing people into play for the Virtual Proceedings. I have three specific questions for the Leader in response to her statement. First, is she able to give a date as to when Virtual Proceedings might start? Secondly, as she may be aware, in the Virtual Committee on the Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill yesterday, it became clear that there is likely to be a desire to press amendments to a vote unless the Government modify their position on Report. Therefore, it will be essential either that a remote voting system is in place after Whitsun or that no Report stage is taken until we have a virtual House, so how are we getting on with proposals for online voting?

In light of the proceedings in the House of Commons yesterday, where apparently the Chancellor of the Exchequer and 21 other Members managed to vote the wrong way in what I understand was the third vote, will the noble Baroness reassure us that we will be trialling our system in such a way that ensures that we do not repeat the mistakes of the other place?

**Baroness Evans of Bowes Park:** My Lords—

**Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town (Lab):** My Lords, I thank the Minister for introducing this Motion. I was going to say what my noble friend Lord Adonis just said. The broadcasting staff who have been working are unseen as we only get to hear their voices, but I hope that they hear our voices when we thank them as well as all the other parliamentary staff who are doing their usual work, because it has been extraordinary.

I only dipped into the Committee yesterday and I heard the particular point raised by my noble friend. But as far as that Committee went, I felt rather sorry for the Minister. Members seemed to be literally face to face and the Minister had to put up with quite a lot, particularly from the noble and learned Lords. He probably did not feel too comfortable with that. In terms of what is possible, it worked well at that stage, although I take the point that was made. I also thank the Procedure Committee for its decision to extend the time for Private Notice Questions. Because we are not having many Statements at the moment, they have become really quite important, and that extra time is welcome.

**Baroness Evans of Bowes Park:** I apologise to the noble Baroness for stepping up too soon—obviously I am not used to dealing with people any more either. I echo the thanks of both the noble Baroness and the noble Lord to the broadcasting team and indeed all the staff across the House. I have in fact been over to see their operation—at a safe distance—and thank them on behalf of us all. They are doing a fantastic job and we all greatly appreciate it.

On the noble Lord's question, I am afraid that I cannot give a specific date on Virtual Proceedings. We have a commission meeting at the end of next week, which I think will finalise the details so that things can move forward. It will take a little bit of time after that

for the House authorities to set up the screens and so on. I assure the noble Lord that we are all very keen to move to a hybrid House, not least for some of the issues that he raised. We will do it as soon as we can after Whitsun, but I do not want to put undue pressure on the authorities by giving him a date now—I cannot. After that commission meeting, I am sure that we will provide further information to Members; we will of course keep everyone updated.

The noble Lord is absolutely right: as I said, remote voting is being developed. The party leaders and usual channels have had a practice and a look through the House of Commons system, which seems pretty simple to me. I cannot speak for our colleagues down the other end. I am sure that your Lordships will master the technology very well. It is, I believe, a good system, and work is ongoing to build that. Again, we are doing it at pace because, as he rightly says, we will have votes coming up and we need to make sure that your Lordships' House is in a position to register its views on issues. As a Government we obviously want to move forward with our legislative agenda, so it is in all our interests. I assure him that work is ongoing and we are again looking to bring it in as soon as is practicable after the Whitsun Recess. We will keep Members updated with timings when I can be specific.

*Motion agreed.*

### Business of the House

*Motion to Agree*

12.37 pm

*Moved by Baroness Evans of Bowes Park*

That until further Order:

1. Motions for general debate taken in a Virtual Proceeding shall be time limited to 3 hours and that this time limit may be varied by the unanimous agreement of the members taking part in any such Virtual Proceeding at the commencement of proceedings;

2. Balloted debates shall resume from Thursday 18 June but only one motion shall be drawn from each ballot, and the debate on the motion shall be taken in a Virtual Proceeding and time limited to 3 hours; and

3. Debates on Statutory Instruments taken in a Virtual Proceeding shall continue to be time limited to 1½ hours and that this time limit may be varied by the unanimous agreement of the members taking part in any such Virtual Proceeding at the commencement of proceedings.

#### **The Lord Privy Seal (Baroness Evans of Bowes Park)**

**(Con):** My Lords, since the start of our Virtual Proceedings, we have time limited individual, party and general debates to three hours each time. This Motion would apply that three-hour time limit to all such debates that take place virtually after today. This is not intended to be a permanent arrangement but one to help plan and manage our business in the current circumstances. The Clerk of the Parliaments wrote to all Members last week setting out the administrative

and broadcasting constraints that we are working under. Once again, I thank everyone for all their efforts in supporting us.

The Motion also makes provision for balloted debates to resume after Whitsun in a way that is compatible with how we are currently working, so we will have one three-hour balloted debate each month, rather than two shorter ones. The Motion also extends a provision that the House agreed to on 28 April to time-limit debates on statutory instruments to one and a half hours. Finally, the Motion provides a mechanism by which these time limits can be adjusted for specific debates, should that be required. We will of course keep our pattern of debates under review and, if it becomes possible to schedule more or longer debates, then we will. I beg to move.

*Motion agreed.*

### Telecommunications Infrastructure (Leasehold Property) Bill

*Committed to Committee*

12.38 pm

*Moved by Baroness Evans of Bowes Park*

That the bill be committed to a Virtual Committee.

*Motion agreed.*

### Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Bill

*Committed to Committee*

12.38 pm

*Moved by Baroness Evans of Bowes Park*

That the bill be committed to a Virtual Committee.

*Motion agreed.*

### Covid-19 Committee

*Motion to Agree*

12.39 pm

*Moved by Baroness Evans of Bowes Park*

That it is desirable that a Select Committee be appointed to consider the long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic and social wellbeing of the United Kingdom.

**The Lord Privy Seal (Baroness Evans of Bowes Park)**  
**(Con):** My Lords, in its first report of this Session, the Liaison Committee recommended that a new Select Committee be set up to look at the long-term implications of Covid-19. This Motion is the first part of the process to make that happen. I beg to move.

**Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town (Lab):** I think that only two of us who are in the Chamber at the moment were on the Liaison Committee that agreed this proposal. Clearly, we welcome it; it went through very fast. It plays absolutely to the strengths of this House, which is why we thought it appropriate that we do it. Given

the particular expertise in this House, whether on the part of those who have international experience or of those with experience in health or the Civil Service, it plays to all the strengths that we have. It was for that reason that we mentioned that we should look internationally—we were thinking about some of the international agencies that could or could not have been better involved—but also cross-department. We are very conscious that the House of Commons will look at specific angles; the idea was not to cover that but to look across government.

Certainly, from our side, but I think also from everyone on the Liaison Committee, we wish this committee well.

*Motion agreed.*

### **Census (England and Wales) Order 2020**

*Motion to Approve*

12.41 pm

*Moved by The Earl of Courtown*

That items 2 (resident particulars), 5, 6 (visitor particulars), 10, 11, 13, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24 (demographic particulars), 27, 28, 29, 32, 33, 34, 36(d) (education and employment particulars), 41, 42, 43 (accommodation particulars), 45, 46 (additional particulars for individual returns) in Schedule 2, and items 1, 2, 3 and 4 in Schedule 3 to the draft Census (England and Wales) Order 2020, which was laid before the House on 2 March, be approved.

*Relevant document: Special attention drawn to the instrument by the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee, 9th Report. Considered in Virtual Proceedings on 12 May.*

*Motion agreed.*

### **Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020**

*Motion to Approve*

12.41 pm

*Moved by The Earl of Courtown*

That the Order laid before the House on 26 March be approved.

*Relevant document: 11th Report from the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee. Considered in Virtual Proceedings on 12 May.*

*Motion agreed.*

### **Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2020**

*Motion to Approve*

12.41 pm

*Moved by The Earl of Courtown*

That the Order laid before the House on 22 April be approved.

*Relevant document: 13th Report from the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee. Considered in Virtual Proceedings on 12 May.*

*Motion agreed.*

*House adjourned at 12.41 pm.*

## **Food Supply and Security**

*Motion to Consider*

1.04 pm

*Moved by Baroness Boycott*

That the Virtual Proceedings do consider food supply and security in the United Kingdom in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

*The Motion was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

**The Deputy Speaker (Baroness Pitkeathley) (Lab):** Good afternoon, my Lords. The Virtual Proceedings on the Motion in the name of the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, will now commence. The debate is time-limited to three hours.

**Baroness Boycott (CB):** My Lords, I am delighted to be able to introduce this debate today, which is timely and important. I especially thank my noble friends on the Cross Benches for choosing this debate out of so many excellent suggestions.

Warren Buffett once said, “When the tide goes out, you can see who’s swimming naked.” Covid-19 has revealed, once and for all, that our food system is no longer fit for purpose. True, it delivers cheap food, but it does so at a huge cost: to the environment, our health and our food security. Environmentally, the impacts are becoming alarmingly clear. Agriculture currently accounts for one-fifth of UK greenhouse gas emissions. Extensive pesticide use is devastating insect populations, fertiliser run-off is polluting our waterways, our soils are depleted, and monocultural production is damaging biodiversity. Our imported food also has impacts globally: agriculture is responsible for about 80% of deforestation worldwide, which reduces our ability to tackle climate change.

At the same time, human health suffers. In the UK, over half of adults are overweight and obese, 5% have diabetes and one-third of five year-olds have terrible tooth decay. An abundance of cheap food masks the fact that healthy foods are three times more expensive per calorie than unhealthy ones. Households in the bottom 10% of income would need to spend 74% of their household income to meet the Government’s own recommendations in the *Eatwell Guide* plate. This is not the Ritz; it is a very basic diet.

Finally, we have seen that our food security is at great risk. The system which delivers food to UK shelves is really complicated and much more vulnerable than we generally acknowledge. Our retailers rely on complicated global supply chains to deliver food to our supermarket shelves in a “just-in-time” process,

leaving them with minimal stocks as a buffer against any shocks. We have simultaneously allowed our domestic food production to languish, particularly for perishable items such as fruit and vegetables—only 16% of fruit and 53% of vegetables are grown in the UK—which provides retailers and, of course, us with less assurance of stable supplies when trade barriers begin to be a concern. The worldwide food price crisis of 2007–08, which we all remember, showed us how easily a serious price crisis can emerge when the nations that dominate production of major global crops impose trade restrictions. It is extraordinary, but for both wheat and rice just five producing nations account for more than 75% of global exports.

Our recent experiences during Covid-19 show starkly what can happen when the system starts to creak. First, the poor health of our nation, and in particular the high levels of diabetes and hypertension—conditions that are absolutely linked with poor diets—have put many of our citizens at risk of Covid-19-related complications. In the USA, 48% of those who have been hospitalised for Covid-19 are obese; the evidence of the links between Covid-19 and obesity is rapidly emerging and can no longer be washed away.

In addition, all of us have experienced, for the first time in most of our lives, the slight alarm and panic that comes from seeing an empty shelf. I suspect that for most of us who are listening and for all of us in the House of Lords, this has been not much more than an inconvenience. We can rustle in the back of our store cupboards and use up long-forgotten tins and jars. But, quite frankly, panic buying is a luxury only for people who can afford it.

For many others, the pandemic has resulted in awful hardship. The Food Foundation—on which I am lucky enough to sit as a trustee—has produced recent figures that suggest that 8 million adults and 2 million children have experienced food insecurity since the lockdown started. Many households in this country were struggling to afford food even before the pandemic, but the recent widespread job losses have vastly increased these numbers. Attendance at food banks is soaring: up 81% in Trussell Trust food banks and 59% in food banks that are part of the Independent Food Aid Network. If food prices rise in the medium term—and there are lots of reasons to believe that they will—the position of these households will become even more fragile.

Farmers in the UK are struggling without access to migrant workers. Farmers here and in southern Europe, where so much of our fresh produce is sourced, are already delaying and reducing spring plantings due to the unpredictability. As we approach the British picking season for soft fruit, salad and many other vegetables, the labour shortage will almost inevitably have an impact on food prices, especially on the price of those healthy foods that people so much need. Twenty countries have already introduced export bans and restrictions since the start of the pandemic. If these become more extensive, the prices for imported staples and perishables could also start to rise.

In the light of all these problems, we have a real need for government leadership and coherent food policy. It is more important than ever. Though I applaud the Government for the efforts they made to

provide those who are shielding with food, much of that food has been, frankly, really unhealthy. I think we have all seen images of donuts being delivered to care homes and the like. They have also made attempts to replace free school meals with monetary vouchers but, as I think many noble Lords will know, the French system that was brought in, Edenred, has had a catastrophic technical failure and a lot of people have been unable to access their vouchers.

There has been good financial protection during the coronavirus pandemic through the job retention scheme and a bit of an uplift to universal credit, but in other respects the response has not been adequate. At such times, we need and expect leadership, effective co-ordination and clear, decisive action. Instead, the Government have made food supply issues the responsibility of the supermarkets—“business as usual”—and food insecurity the business of charities. Support for food producers has been almost completely absent.

The closure of vast swathes of the food service sector has exacerbated the strains on the food system, making it inevitable that consumers would buy more food from retailers—30% of calories are usually eaten outside the home. This has led to things such as the milk surplus, because certain food cannot be diverted at the right time. We needed a massive effort to re-engineer existing food supply chains, but, unfortunately, the retail sector has been gifted an extra £2 billion in sales versus this time last year. That is a staggering amount of profit. An opportunity was missed to make creative use of existing catering and restaurant businesses. Small local cafes and farm shops could have been kept in business, supplying food to the vulnerable. Instead, the Government fell back on engaging almost exclusively with the big supermarkets on food supply issues, which has, in effect, concentrated more power in their hands—although I must say that they have done a pretty good job.

Similarly, the Government have relied on charitable food aid to plug the gaps in their inadequate response to the problem of food insecurity. The frankly heroic efforts of these organisations ought to be applauded every night, but the scale of the challenge is unprecedented, and there is just not enough food or volunteer capacity to feed all vulnerable people through local authority and charitable means.

Suffering from cuts to welfare assistance, in a lot of cases local authorities are able only to send someone to the local food bank. Some local authorities—Bristol, for instance—which had existing strong food partnerships in place before the crisis have been able to scale this up, but, at the moment, people’s experience of support from the state is dictated by their postcode. We must have a national assessment of need and a nationally co-ordinated, ambitious, money-first approach to deal with the ballooning food insecurity problem.

Alongside this, our food producers have been neglected, instead of recognised and supported as the essential sector they are. Our farmers need support and investment to tide them through this period of uncertainty. In the longer term, I hope the Government will recognise the important role that small producers can play in boosting our resilience and seek to deliver for them a more equal playing field.

During this crisis, the smallest of our producers have turned out to be the most flexible and quick on the ground. Some veg box schemes have more than doubled the number of boxes that they distribute, and most now have really long waiting lists for new customers. Horticultural producers have received decades of under-investment compared with other farming sectors. For the record, subsidies make up just 10% of their average farm income, compared with 79% for farmers in the cereals business. Quite modest ongoing government support could transform all these local networks, providing much healthier food and a really good, resilient network.

We need to recognise the underlying flaws in our food system that this episode has revealed. We must build back better, creating more resilient, healthier and fairer food systems for our future. Instead of washing their hands and passing the buck back to supermarkets, charities and farmers, we desperately need the Government to show leadership. We are facing an unprecedented moment, one full of risk but also full of opportunity. We must make our food system resilient to economic shocks and environmental and climate risks. It must be less dependent on last-minute deliveries of vital perishable goods from overseas. We must diversify food retail options to create more vibrant local food economies.

We must prioritise our nation's health. Food and health campaigners have long known of the terrible effects of bad nutrition—there is nothing new about this—but Covid has brought it into stark relief. I find it astonishing that we still measure our global success in a health sense by just the number of years lived, and that life expectancy seems to be a goal above quality of life and health. People are literally dying—quickly this time, rather than slowly—because they eat bad food. This is a chance to start to change that. We must not go back to the good old bad old days of “stack ‘em high, sell ‘em cheap” processed food. We must stop spending 98.5% of all the food advertising budget on processed food. We have to step in and intervene. We have literally proved that our lives, and the quality of our lives, depend on it.

Government should give businesses that promote healthy eating a real head start, rebuild our nation's horticulture sector and put in place much more robust economic safety nets, so that everyone can afford a diet that protects their health. A recent poll by the RSA suggests that only 9% of people want to go back to normal after the pandemic. The British public are showing a big appetite for change. We should use this opportunity to start fixing what has been shown to be broken.

1.18 pm

**Lord Naseby (Con):** My Lords, I will focus on horticulture, a vital part of our country's food production. I am in Sandy, Bedfordshire: the heart of horticulture. Our horticultural show is 150 years old.

Two aspects arise from Covid-19, on top of Brexit. The first challenge is that the workforce is seasonal, with 70,000, or thereabouts, needed every year. Thankfully, the Government have produced a short-term scheme for 2020, but this industry needs a long-term scheme and to know that these workers—who are absolutely vital to the success of horticulture—will be able to come through our immigration scheme. The immigration

policy has to reflect this. I thank the Government for the temporary situation, but the industry needs some future help and to know what is happening.

The second issue is that horticulture needs energy to heat glass-houses. Some 30 years ago, we lost out when the Dutch found cheap oil and gas from the North Sea. Energy costs are therefore a key element. We will never revive the glass-house industry as long as it has to pay the current market prices. As I look around Bedfordshire, I see that its glass-houses that once prospered are in disrepair.

Those are the two issues. To ensure our food production, we need 70,000-plus seasonal workers, and a highly competitive energy supply for the glass-house industry to succeed.

1.20 pm

**Lord Grantchester (Lab):** My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for introducing this debate and I declare my interest as someone running a dairy farm business which includes a farmers' co-operative and a farm shop. Ever since *Food from Our Own Resources*, the answer has not resulted in more self-sufficiency or a greater food supply being needed. Can this pandemic be different and the food supply be re-engineered? While recognising the huge inequalities that have resulted in more food banks, the supply resilience of food has not been a problem in our rich western democracy. However, we must not overlook the increasing problems of food poverty in modern Britain. Shorter local food chains are needed.

The pandemic led to an immediate shutdown of the food service sector. Some 50% of food is consumed outside the home, and the supply chains of supermarkets and the retail sector displayed great resilience after the initial disruption of the switch. Online demand and supply increased rapidly, but underlying food issues remain. In the short term, the Groceries Supply Code of Practice and the adjudicator have embedded food supply governance in the reputational risk management of the retail supply chain. As in health, where the contrast has been between the NHS and the care sector, retail contrasts with the multifaceted disparities in food service, where bad behaviour has pushed supply chain risk down into the farming sector. How will food chain service behaviour be made to respond, become Covid 19-compliant and adapt to social distancing?

The overriding answer lies in food nutrition. The health of a nation is determined by the quality of the food it eats; the answer does not lie in even more poor-quality food becoming ever cheaper. Nor is it to do with exports. The emphasis must be on increasing food quality standards, as displayed yesterday in Labour's amendment to the Agriculture Bill. Can people become obese through eating only highly nutritious food? Where is the Government's food policy document? Another problem relates to competition law. If this law has had to be put aside during this crisis, is it really fit for purpose?

1.22 pm

**Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD):** I also thank the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for introducing the debate. My admirable Lib Dem colleagues will cover the whole breadth of the topic. The broader issue in one part of the UK which is perhaps greater than any other is the

fact that two-thirds of total Northern Ireland imports and exports are in bilateral agri-food and intermediate trade, so the pressure of the Covid-19 impacts are major. However, added to what the Government propose from January 2021, it should make us pause. For the first time in our nation's history, United Kingdom businesses in Northern Ireland will operate under foreign laws, regulations and standards set by a body that we are not a member of and over which they have no say. Also for the first time in our history, one UK business buying from or selling to another UK business will have to do so through a customs border control post, with foreign tariffs applied as a default and checks decided by the EU being carried out. Animals and animal products going into Northern Ireland from Great Britain will be treated as if they have come from a foreign country.

We found this out through details in letters going to Brussels which have been disclosed to the Northern Ireland Assembly, not through information given to us here. Last November, Boris Johnson said that of course there will never be checks. That was repeated by the noble Lord, Lord Bates, during consideration last year of the Trade Bill, and the fact that that was still the position was repeated to me directly on two occasions by the noble Lord, Lord Callanan. Moreover, in a feat of redefining the words “unfettered access”, the noble Lord, Lord True, said in a rather sleekit way in the same paragraph during a debate last Tuesday that there would be “administrative measures”, while today the Prime Minister's official spokesman said, without a hint of a blush, “There were always going to be checks.”

My question to the Minister, who is an honourable man, is this. When will we see the legislative proposals for these new checks and the burdensome procedures at the new customs and regulatory border within the UK, so that we can scrutinise them fully and give them proper accountability, which so far these proposals have lacked?

1.25 pm

**Lord Ramsbotham (CB):** My Lords, I congratulate my noble friend Lady Boycott on her persistent pursuit of this important issue, including obtaining this debate, which she introduced so comprehensively. I declare an interest as president of the Institute for Food, Brain and Behaviour, whose main interest is healthy nutrition.

Currently, farmers rely on 70,000 seasonal workers, mostly from eastern Europe, to pick vegetables and fruit in particular. The Countryside Alliance, which I thank for its excellent briefing, draws attention to farmers' lack of certainty in both the 2018 White Paper on immigration and the current pilot scheme, which runs out at the end of 2020. Vegetable and fruit farmers say that they cannot meet the demand without these foreign workers. In response to my noble friend's Oral Question on 30 April, the Minister said that the Government were “mobilising a British workforce”, which they have palpably been unable to do thus far. I have one suggestion, based on the pioneering work of last year's High Sheriff of Suffolk, George Vestey: have the Government considered using prisoners on day release, or making use of the numbers on probation requiring unpaid work in the community?

1.27 pm

**The Lord Bishop of St Albans:** My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for this debate and I declare my interest as president of the Rural Coalition. It is often said that the primary duty of government is the defence of the realm: equally important is the need to feed the population. When a crisis hits, we can survive for a considerable time without importing computers and machinery, but without food we last only a few weeks. Fortunately, during this pandemic the food chain has held up relatively well, although a number of shortages in the early days of the lockdown acted as a salutary warning. Within days of the lockdown, many of our churches here in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire had set up food banks or parish pantries, not just in poorer areas such as Stevenage or Farley Hill, but in wealthier villages such as Flamstead and Ponsbourne.

Farming is different from other industries, because you cannot keep land in reserve and bring it back into production at the flick of a switch; you cannot keep milking cows in storage to bring out when there is a shortage. Our farmers are some of the best in the world and need our support, not just for their own livelihoods but because they provide an essential public service—that is why we need to help them get the workers they need to bring the harvest in. Will the Minister support the idea that we should dedicate one of our Thursday evenings to outdoor applause for British farmers and food producers? Will he commit Her Majesty's Government to increasing the level of food security in Britain, both now and to protect us in the future?

1.29 pm

**Baroness Redfern (Con):** I too thank the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for securing this debate. All parts of the economy have been hit hard during this Covid crisis, with customers not spending in cafes and restaurants, resulting in a dramatic loss of income almost equal to the spend on food and drink through our retail stores. We have seen the demise of our dairy processing capacity during the pandemic, with 2 million litres of milk produced per day which would have gone to the food-service market. Spikes and drops are difficult to manage, with risks being passed down to farmers and growers. Taps cannot just be turned off and on. With a total UK grain crop of about 24 million tonnes, the collapse of maize demand from the ethanol market risks a deluge of feed grain on the world market in a prolonged price depression. Living in Lincolnshire, a very diverse county, labelled “the breadbasket of the UK”, growing Maris Piper and Cara potatoes to supply our chips and crisps sector, we have been hit very hard. The south of the county has one of the largest horticultural sectors, so I am pleased that restrictions have now been eased.

We must learn from Covid-19 regarding our approach to the domestic agricultural policy and international trade policy post Brexit. A focus on food security and food resilience during this epidemic is, and must be, financially supported. We must see the gradual phasing out of CAP direct payments and move to a welcome system that: rewards farmers and growers; increases farm productivity while delivering fairness along the



food supply chain; includes a duty to support our environment; instils confidence for the long term; and builds capacity to increase our export markets. Post Covid, to see UK agriculture operate again in an increasingly global market, agriculture must not be left behind.

**The Deputy Speaker:** I call the noble Baroness, Lady Young of Old Scone. Oh, her sound quality is so poor that we will move on to the next speaker and come back to her later. We are having great difficult hearing—apologies. I call the noble Baroness, Lady Janke.

1.32 pm

**Baroness Janke (LD):** My Lords, the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus highlights weaknesses in the food system and will exacerbate issues relating to food poverty and diet-related ill health, particularly for those in the lowest income groups. The Food Foundation described this as a “crisis on a crisis”. In Britain, too many people already struggle to afford sufficient nourishing food. Citizens report skipping meals, going without so that their children can eat, reducing portion sizes and cutting back on the quality of the food that they buy.

Household food insecurity has been widely documented and measured by civil society and government for some time. Many food-insecure households resort to using food banks. Last year, an estimated 3 million food parcels were sent out by the Trussell Trust and independent food banks, but these amount to only a small proportion of those who struggle to afford and access adequate diets. According to the Trussell Trust, the main reasons for food poverty and insecurity are:

“Income not covering the cost of essentials ... Benefit Delays ... Benefit Changes”.

The evidence of the long-term effects of poor diet on health is well documented.

The worst levels of food poverty and hunger are symptomatic of the wider problem of poverty. Food poverty and insecurity will be addressed only by tackling the root causes of poverty. The current crisis has shone a light on the holes in the social safety net. Many families and individuals have suddenly found themselves with zero income. Children are not receiving free school meals. The five-week wait for universal credit, the two-child limit, the benefit cap and the automatic sanctions all hit the poorest the hardest.

Going forward, there must be a review of social insurance systems and the scandal of in-work poverty. We must ensure that people earn enough and that we have a system of social insurance to give realistic support in times of hardship, so that all our citizens live healthy and sustainable lives.

1.35 pm

**Lord Patel (CB):** My Lords, I will concentrate my brief comments on the long-term impacts of the pandemic on UK food security. Harper Adams University and POST, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, of which I am a member, have produced well-researched papers on the subject.

If the UK food system is to be resilient and sustainable, it needs that planning now. In times of uncertainty, data, analysis and expertise become important in

decision-making. Now is the time to start collecting data related to factors affecting food supply disruption, costs and changing consumer choices, et cetera. Who in the Government is doing this now? It is also time for researchers, agribusiness and farmers to work together to understand better how food supply chains can be made shorter, more resilient and sustainable. How are the Government helping to do this?

There are many other areas where attention is needed, such as the technologies needed to produce food; identifying foods that could be produced closer to home, and products where holding big inventories makes sense; and areas where the diversification of the supply chain is beneficial. The pandemic has disrupted the UK food supply system. It has also created an opportunity to build a more resilient and sustainable system, through better policymaking and regulations which promote co-ordinated action. In this context, does the Minister think that an independent body for food, rather like the Committee on Climate Change, to help drive the Government’s policy on sustainable food could be a way forward? If he does not, can he tell the House how else the Government intend to do this?

1.37 pm

**Lord Empey (UUP):** My Lords, I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, on her tour de force in introducing this debate. I also congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Purvis of Tweed, on his forensic analysis of the situation that will exist between Northern Ireland and Great Britain following the transition period.

In a recent Parliamentary Answer to me, the Government said that they had no plans to introduce any import substitution units to secure our businesses in the post-EU position. Can the Minister say why they will not do that? Given the lessons that we are learning from Covid-19, surely the supply of goods—food in particular—has been shown to have significant vulnerabilities. I hope that he and the Government will not rely simply on hiding behind the forthcoming report from Henry Dimbleby on the national food strategy. It is perfectly clear that these matters relating to the environment of food security require a national response across Whitehall, not focused on one single department.

Will the Minister address why the Government will not consider introducing an import substitution unit so that we can guarantee food security in the future and have wider benefits for business generally? We have heard from noble Lords about horticulture and related businesses. Why can we not do better? We have to have greater ambition, and surely we must learn the lessons of the current crisis not only to secure the food supply but to deal with the health and environmental issues that arise.

1.39 pm

**Lord Taylor of Holbeach (Con):** My Lords, the House will probably be aware of my horticultural and agricultural interests in the register, which I declare. I am fortunate to live at the heart of my family business; the last eight weeks have been an opportunity to reconnect with my roots after a long spell of time spent in government and the House. I thank the noble

Baroness, Lady Boycott, for leading this debate and I hope that she enjoyed a very happy birthday yesterday. Of course, yesterday was also a birthday for gardening and horticulture with the reopening of garden centres. I thank my noble friend the Minister for all he did to make that happen. We are very lucky to have his commitment to farming and the countryside.

Growing is about excellence. If we have learned anything from Covid-19 and the importance of food security, it is that we should back farmers and growers to regenerate our industry. As with medicine, we have excellent science in ag and hort—NIAB, Kew, John Innes, Rothamsted—and there really is no conflict between efficient farming and the environment. The only flowers now blooming in our daffodil fields are specially drilled field margins for bird life and pollinators. In the Lincolnshire silt lands, we have the most intensive agricultural production in the country, but you will also find trees, hedges, spinneys and owl boxes, which were not there a generation ago. Good can come out of this terrible time and the Agriculture Bill—likely to shortly come before us—gives us a real opportunity, post Brexit, to release this huge economic potential and build a prosperous industry for the future.

1.41 pm

**Baroness Quin (Lab):** My Lords, I also pay tribute to the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, both for this debate and for her campaigning work on food poverty and food insecurity.

I will raise two issues where I think the Government need to rethink their policy. The first is immigration, which has been mentioned. As well as maximising the job opportunities for our own citizens, we need a much more flexible immigration policy, particularly for the agricultural and food industries, where a range of skills is needed, from fruit picking to specialised vets. Our rigid approach ignores many of the real needs of our economy. Indeed, last night on the BBC news we saw the case of a hospital cleaner, currently doing absolutely vital work but facing an unaffordable bill for her visa extension. This is crazy. We need more flexibility and humanity in our immigration policy.

Secondly, we need to rethink our trade policy. We seem to be prioritising trade deals far beyond Europe but, for agriculture and the food industry, EU trade is vital. In the post-Covid world, and to meet environmental goals, we need to trade more, not less, with our nearest neighbours.

We have to get those important EU trade negotiations right for our economy's sake, and because of the complications for Northern Ireland that we have heard about. The Government seems to have ruled out any alteration to the timetable, whatever the circumstances. I put it to the Minister that we have been plagued by unrealistic declamatory self-imposed deadlines for political reasons rather than economic or common-sense considerations. Can we please, from now on, make decisions based on what is best for our economic recovery, not on political dogma?

1.43 pm

**Baroness Sheehan (LD):** My Lords, I was privileged to be a member of the Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee when it produced Brexit-related reports

on agriculture, and on food prices and availability. The two key vulnerabilities in our food system that the Covid-19 crisis has laid bare were highlighted in those reports: first, the UK's dependency on the rest of the world, given that half our food is imported; and secondly, the gaping labour gap left by EU workers who do so much of the heavy lifting in all aspects of food manufacturing, in both skills and stamina. Can the Minister say what progress has been made by the Feed the Nation campaign to fill the 80,000 vacancies for this harvest season?

The British Veterinary Association states that 95% of official veterinarians working in abattoirs come mainly from the EU. These OVs are essential to ensuring compliance with food standards and regulations, as well as upholding levels of animal welfare. A reduction in their numbers will seriously compromise the FSA's ability to sustain a sufficient service. How has the food safety inspections regime been coping with reduced personnel, the difficulty of maintaining social distancing measures in food production settings, and a shortage of PPE? Essentially, is enough being done to safeguard the public against the risk of food-borne disease? Lastly, what advice have scientists given about the risk of SARS-CoV-2 jumping the species barrier from humans back to the animal kingdom—to, say, chickens?

1.45 pm

**Lord Cameron of Dillington (CB):** My Lords, Covid-19 has shown the importance of having a resilient food industry. It is obvious that our food security needs to be under constant review. We do not need dodgy imports that undercut our own agriculture, and, as we move away from the cosy security of the CAP, we must ensure that our own high-quality domestic agriculture remains the foundation of our nation's food security policy.

For instance, we need to train farmers and encourage the higher production of pulses and vegetables from our own resources. We must ensure that all government institutions buy local, as in France, and with the people's new love of their local countryside, we must encourage them also to buy the food whose production creates that countryside—we must teach them to eat the view.

That brings me to my main point. In looking at agriculture, we must step back. We must never look at our food production in isolation or in a food silo. It is rural resilience that we seek. Our countryside provides many benefits: landscape, biodiversity, energy, timber, health, spiritual health and, of course, food. We must encourage the best management of our countryside to produce all those benefits.

It is currently hard for a family farm to survive on food production alone, so, particularly in remote parts of Britain, we must help them diversify. Also, we must help the farming household to find cash wages from jobs off the farm to ensure the survival of the farm itself.

The importance of the wider rural economy to the resilience of family farms and all they produce, including food, cannot be overestimated. The further you go from urban centres, the more and more that rings true.

1.47 pm

**Lord Holmes of Richmond (Con):** My Lords, I will touch on the people involved in food supply, on the technology associated with it and, briefly, on the supermarkets' protected delivery list.

First, I thank all those involved in food supply in this country, not least those on the front line in our supermarkets. They deserve our enduring gratitude. I take my hat off to Marks & Spencer, which has offered 15% bonuses to its staff in those situations. Is the Minister assured that the Government are doing everything they can to ensure the safety and protection of all our workers in these situations? Have the workers had access to testing, as promised? How many working in our food supply chains have taken up the option to be tested?

Turning to technology, Covid has clearly demonstrated that our supply chains have failed the challenge. Does the Minister agree that we need much more resilience in our supply chains and that that can be provided through new technologies, not least distributed ledger technologies, the internet of things and other elements of the fourth industrial revolution? Is he aware of the proof of concept project by Chainvine, which clearly demonstrates this and which HMRC, other parts of our government and the Australian Government have been involved in? Having such technologies in our supply chains would also help to prevent massive levels of fraud occurring in our food supplies. Is he aware of the recent study carried out by Queen's University Belfast, showing that over 42% of the fraud found in the beef supply was counterfeit? Distributed ledger technology would eradicate such problems. Does he agree that the Government need to push distributed ledger technology further to enable supply chains to give us the resilience that we need but which we clearly do not have at this time?

Finally, will my noble friend consider extending the protected list of those who can gain supermarket online delivery slots to blind people, who are currently particularly vulnerable, not least in their inability easily to police social distancing? That would make a real difference to the lives of hundreds of thousands of people right now.

1.49 pm

**The Earl of Shrewsbury (Con):** My Lords, I declare my interests in the register and also declare that my youngest son is a poultry farmer in Lincolnshire. I pay tribute to all those involved in British agriculture and horticulture, who are doing their absolute utmost under challenging circumstances to keep the nation fed.

A recent article in the *Grocer* magazine stated that, since the onset of Covid-19, retail demand for shell eggs has increased significantly, with egg sale volumes up almost 20%. While UK supermarkets have largely stocked only UK-sourced shell eggs since the 1988 salmonella outbreak—an event which led to the creation of the British Lion accreditation scheme—it is reported that Lidl, the supermarket chain, has been importing cheap Dutch eggs, citing shortages of UK product. Such imported eggs are not produced to the same high food standards as UK eggs which bear the Lion mark. The industry does not recognise such shortages, stating simply that it has experienced some logistical problems—as have many foodstuff suppliers.

I understand from the British Free Range Egg Producers Association that it is extremely rare for imported eggs from any production system to be stocked in supermarkets. However, a considerable source of frustration to producers currently is that the discounters, Lidl and Aldi, drove down the price of free-range eggs by 18 pence a dozen at the end of last summer, leading to many producers receiving around 75 to 80 pence per dozen compared to £1 and more some two to three years ago. The result is that many producers have gone out of business and others simply have not stocked their sheds. Such behaviour does not show the discounters in a good light and it certainly does nothing to support British farming and food production.

With the Agriculture Bill due to arrive in your Lordships' House shortly, I shall bring this matter to the Minister's attention in much greater detail at Second Reading. In the meantime, I ask that his officials contact both discounters as a matter of urgency to express the producers' concerns.

1.52 pm

**Baroness Mallalieu (Lab):** My Lords, we are indebted to the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, who, like me, farms down here in sunny Somerset.

I will make three very short points. First, at the production end, the acute labour shortage is being temporarily patched by students and furloughed workers. However, long term, it cannot be met from domestic labour. The details of a long-term agricultural visa scheme must be rapidly finalised and rolled out, and rolled out beyond just horticulture, as other parts of the land economy need it too. The numbers must be dictated by the needs of the industry, not some government target, as the noble Baroness, Lady Quin, just said.

Secondly, the bottom fell out of the market for not just milk but beef and lamb too. Producers are trying hard to find new markets with direct sales to the public both locally and online. Small and medium-sized local abattoirs are essential for this, but few remain. The giants are often distant and do not cater for small, private kills. The benefits of short supply lines are now apparent to us all, as are the public benefits of reduced food miles and local food from known provenance. In relation to future funding, local abattoirs need to be recognised as a public benefit by local enterprise partnerships, the shared prosperity fund—which we are all looking to—and local authority planning applications.

Lastly, small, local shops, whether in a village or on a street corner, have often stepped in when supermarkets have failed to cope, especially with services for the vulnerable and those in most need. They are the heart of the community at this moment. We must continue to use them more in future and support charities such as the Plunkett Foundation, which helps to set up community shops and enterprises.

1.54 pm

**Lord Lucas (Con):** My Lords, I am very grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for the chance to have this debate. In my view, the Government have done exceptionally well in this crisis. We have not suffered any major outage in food supply; there were a few wobbles to begin with, naturally, but we are in a pretty good place now. We have learned a lot about

resilience over the past year, with all the planning that went into no deal, the actuality now of dealing with Covid and, possibly, further planning ahead to deal with the chance of no deal this December. We must preserve this expertise; the Civil Service naturally disperses it as the people who have developed all the learning, the archives and the understanding get moved on to other jobs.

That must not happen this time. There will be another crisis like this: a wheat disease that proves difficult to resist or some much more lethal infection, meaning that travel and indeed trade between countries gets closed down to preserve populations. We need not only to rehearse the possibility of these crises regularly and keep our systems intact, but to adopt policies that make us more resilient over time. As the noble Lord, Lord Cameron, said, the idea of “government by local” is really important, ensuring consistent demand for small-scale producers. We must embrace the science on GM crops so that we can broaden our supply without having greater impact on the countryside. We must work when we are building power stations to use all that spare heat to grow vegetables, because that increases our resilience.

There are many things that the Government can do over time. I very much hope that my noble friend the Minister will set us on the road at the end of this debate.

1.56 pm

**Lord Hope of Craighead (CB):** My Lords, the noble Baroness’s word “supply” brings to my mind my brief time in the Army when on National Service in the 1950s. An army marches on its stomach, as everyone knows. That depends on supply and, as every regimental quartermaster would say to the Minister, supply, in turn, depends on two crucial things: information and logistics. Information is about who, what and when—who wants it, what they want and when. Logistics are about how to get it there. These questions are absolutely on-point in the present crisis.

Access to farm labour is my issue, as the supply of seasonal workers from eastern Europe has dried up. I believe there is a place for much more highly organised and urgent government action than we have seen so far, preferably along with the skilled advice of the military. Defra’s Pick For Britain campaign—introduced too late, just over three weeks ago—was a start, but there is no organisation from the centre. It is left to individuals to take up the invitation and get to where they are needed, if they are willing to take up an offer. The initial response was not encouraging and many deregistered themselves when they were given the facts. An individual living in London, for example, was offered a place in Tayside, over 450 miles away. It was in the fruit-growing areas in Tayside in the 1960s that I saw what could be done. Buses toured around Dundee in the early morning, picking up workers, taking them to the farms where they were needed and taking them home in the evenings. That was logistics in action. The Minister might perhaps study and follow that example. It shows that this can be done.

1.58 pm

**Baroness Verma (Con):** My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for opening the debate and covering a wide range of issues for us to discuss.

I want to focus on a couple of points. First, given noble Lords’ understanding of the importance of nutrition, maybe we need to think about reintroducing classes in domestic science and cookery so that children can understand the value of food and what goes into a meal. I hope that my noble friend the Minister will consider speaking to colleagues in the Department for Education to explore the idea of bringing good-quality food and local produce to children from an early age.

I agree with the noble Baroness that buying local is important, as is ensuring that we support our local small shops and farming communities. However, as we come out of this pandemic and continue to import our foods from export markets in the developing world, will the Minister also ensure that we work closely with those farming communities, signing up to fair prices so that their economies can also grow fairly and ensuring that their working practices are in line with the value systems and value chains to which we attach great importance in this country?

No one should be a loser from the pandemic. My concern is that, while we are supportive of our own industry, others who need this growth in their economies do not miss out.

2 pm

**Lord McNicol of West Kilbride (Lab):** I start by thanking the noble and learned Lord, Lord Hope, for taking me back to my student days in Dundee and reminding me of the fruit picking I did across Tayside. The shortage of labour, both migrant and domestic, during the current health crisis is causing a shortage of workers on farms. Farmers have warned that up to 80,000 positions need to be filled, or we risk a large proportion of British produce going to waste. With 1.6 million people having to rely on food banks, it would be shocking if the Government allowed a large amount of produce to go to waste, especially when there is such a need for it. The lack of labour has put the British farming industry at serious risk. As one industry expert recently said, this will finish off farms: there will not be the fruit and veg in the shops.

A shortage of fruit and vegetables will have severe consequences. It also carries the risk of the further spread of Covid-19 as a result of malnutrition and people’s immune systems being weakened, increasing the likelihood of infection. The Government need to do all they possibly can to avoid that with initiatives to mobilise people and to support farmers and farms of all sizes. As someone who grew up on a smallholding on the west coast of Scotland, I am working with Ayrshire potatoes and delivering them to local suppliers and local families. The benefit of having small farmers producing locally and supplying locally should not be underestimated. If the Government fail in this regard, they will put the health of millions at risk as well as the future of the agricultural industry. That needs to be avoided at all costs. What plans do the Government have in place to make sure that does not happen?

2.02 pm

**Baroness Randerson (LD):** My Lords, I start by paying tribute to the staff of supermarkets and small shops who have worked throughout this crisis. They did not expect their jobs to become dangerous. The past

eight weeks have highlighted the vulnerability of our reliance on food imports, which form 47% of the food we eat. Twenty-eight per cent of our food comes from the EU, and until now we have been able to rely on that as a steady supply. If the Government fulfil their aim of ending the transition period in October, the UK will be open to greater food insecurity as EU imports will be hit by border checks.

I see in the news today that the Government have at last admitted that there will be border checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Retail Consortium estimates that this will add £100,000 a lorry of additional cost—the last thing Northern Ireland needs as it tries to recover from the pandemic.

Food supplies were already facing disruption because of a likely shortage of pickers—several noble Lords have referred to this. It is another key link in the supply chain because so many EU nationals left after Brexit. That problem is now magnified by the lack of available flights for temporary workers wanting to come here just for the picking season.

Finally, there is the distribution network. Airlines and airports are glad to step in to provide more cargo flights. Haulage companies have faced practical problems operating across countries in lockdown. If the transition period comes to an end, they will face major additional problems due to delays at the border. Ferry companies have been losing money and have asked for financial help. I look forward to hearing from the Minister on that issue in particular.

2.04 pm

**Baroness Meacher (CB):** My Lords, I warmly welcome this debate tabled by the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott—a true champion of sustainable and affordable food production. I have just two points.

One is the need to create a positive out of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have all woken up to the delights of clean air, almost no aeroplanes and few cars. One way is to reduce food imports and to grow more food locally. As the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, pointed out, at present the UK supplies only about 53% of the food we consume. This means that 47%—in particular fruit, vegetables and meat—comes on planes and ships from overseas. We would surely all welcome a policy to drive down our dependence on food from across the world, but this means all of us being willing to eat seasonal fruit and vegetables and less meat. If ever we are to make such a shift, surely now is the time when people will be willing to do it. Do the Government plan to provide incentives to achieve that sort of change at this strategic moment?

My other point, closely related, is a plea that the wonderful Capital Growth programme of the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, growing food in London, be extended to the rest of the country. Again, if ever there was the right time to do that, it is surely now.

2.06 pm

**The Earl of Caithness (Con):** My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for this important debate and her comprehensive introduction. Will my noble friend the Minister join me in thanking our farmers

and agribusiness for adapting so quickly and keeping food available to us all at a still remarkably low price? It is a sadness that some farming businesses, particularly dairy and ornamental businesses, have not survived or will not survive.

As Covid-19 is a worldwide problem, food imported from overseas will affect our food supply later this year. Some countries, such as Russia and India, are restricting exporting some foodstuffs, while the USA will dump surplus grain on the market. When considering this trade, however, we must remember how important our own food exports are to our industry.

When looking at any food system, one needs to look at health, the environment and food security. Perhaps more challenging to our farmers than Covid-19 has been the weather of the last nine months. Clearly, climate change will alter what we farm and the way we farm it. Our farmers are adapting to this and to the need to improve our biodiversity. In the past they have done what the Government requested, and they will continue to produce top-quality food—but much of this will then be processed, as the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, told us. No one would put diesel in a petrol vehicle. Given the harm this food does to us and the cost to the NHS and the economy, what plans does my noble friend have to stop us being the processed food capital of Europe and eating so much poison?

**The Deputy Speaker (Lord Rogan) (UUP):** Lord West of Spithead. No? I call the noble Baroness, Lady Parminter.

2.08 pm

**Baroness Parminter (LD):** My Lords, we know that if we are to help our bodies, we need to eat well and to eat sufficient fruit and vegetables. We must therefore as a priority pick the harvest that needs to be picked at the moment. As my noble friend Lady Sheehan said, the Government have introduced a Pick for Britain scheme, but no collated statistics have been provided yet. Can the Minister provide those today to show how successful we are in getting in the UK workers we need?

We will need skilled pickers to come in from other countries. On our local farm, which is one of the biggest employers of fruit pickers in the country, 77% of those have come from eastern Europe in the past. The Government have increased the seasonal workers pilot scheme to 10,000 workers, but how many are actually getting here? I understand that 2,000 are currently waiting to get their biometrics done in countries including Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia, but the visa centres are closed. What steps are the Government taking to address those blockages?

As my noble friend Lady Randerson said, flights are being chartered—difficult though that is—but has Defra spoken to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office about the opportunity that repatriating Britons from other parts of the world could provide in bringing in some of those seasonal workers? My understanding is that, in the last two weeks, 80 people from Barbados could have come in, but the repatriation flights took off without discussions with charities bringing in seasonal workers to help pick our harvest.

The fruit and vegetable harvest is short, and those products have a short shelf life. We need those workers now, so that farmers do not make the difficult decision that the more cost-effective option is to plough those vegetables back into the field, and so that we do not lose those health-giving fruits and vegetables.

2.10 pm

**Baroness McIntosh of Pickering (Con):** My Lords, I recognise the role of farmers and the food industry in putting food on our plates, and I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, on bringing this debate and putting local food production front and centre. Ideally, local food, locally distributed and bought in local shops should be what we are aiming for, and it complies with the essential requirement of traceability. Food and drink are part of the UK's critical national infrastructure, and the ability to feed ourselves is essential and should be at the heart of any government policy.

In addition to sourcing more food locally, I make a plea to my noble friend the Minister that we should now avail ourselves of public procurement policy that is no longer bound by EU policy. Will the Government issue guidance to ensure that schools, hospitals, prisons, local authorities and other public bodies source more domestically produced food?

Imports of fruit, meat and vegetables are higher than what we currently produce, so will the Government take action to ensure that we have greater self-sufficiency by boosting home production? That is not to say that exports are not important, particularly in areas such as pig-farming—pig parts are appetising to the Chinese and provide a great export opportunity for somewhere such as the Malton bacon factory. Will the Minister ensure that we do more to improve our self-sufficiency, by taking more home-produced food, and that animals are moving through the chain, through livestock marts and abattoirs?

2.12 pm

**Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB):** My Lords, I have two minutes and two questions; one on seasonal workers and one on food waste. To ensure that food is picked and harvests are brought in, can we please look again at the overly rigid, target-focused December 2018 White Paper and remove the 70,000 seasonal workers from net migration figures, creating a separate category? Will the Government also urgently look again at relaxing work prohibitions on asylum seekers who are resident in the United Kingdom, enabling them to help in this year's harvesting of crops?

On food waste, it is a scandal of epic proportions that a throwaway culture can trash nearly a third of all food produced, while nearly 800 million people do not have enough food to eat to lead healthy, active lives—that is around one in nine people on this earth. As my noble friend Lady Boycott eloquently reminded us in her speech introducing this debate, food inequality in the United Kingdom is growing too. Some 30% of food produced globally is currently wasted. That is an economic and ethical outrage.

Reports from the institute of engineering and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine say that 6% to 10% of greenhouse gases are produced by

food waste. In the course of one recent year, around 100 million tonnes of food was dumped in Europe. Wasted food would feed the estimated 1 billion people who are without food or hungry today, while another 1 billion could be fed if we curbed overeating and obesity, which was referred to by my noble friend. It has been calculated that if the world's food waste mountain was piled up, it would be the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases, after only the USA and China, accounting for 10% of man-made greenhouse gas emissions.

Staying close to the land, farming sustainably, tackling waste and changing patterns are long overdue. That would bring many environmental and health gains. In Chinese calligraphy, the word “crisis” can also be read as the word “opportunity”. I hope that the Government will indeed turn this crisis into an opportunity.

2.14 pm

**Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle (GP):** I join other noble Lords in thanking the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for securing this debate and for her comprehensive and deeply sobering introduction. I associate the Green group with all the concerns that she expressed. I do not know whether in recording this debate, *Hansard* plans to put the phrase “cheap food” in scare quotes, but it certainly should. So-called cheap food is costing us the earth and our health.

I know that when farmers hear criticism of the food system, they often feel that it is directed at them, but many noble Lords have rightly focused on the overweening, enormous place of supermarkets in our food distribution system. The National Farmers' Union has highlighted how farmers get just 6% in the food chain. The noble Earl, Lord Caithness, focused on how supermarkets advertise, promote and push highly processed food that is disastrous for our health. The noble Lord, Lord Lucas, rightly said that government procurement should look to support local food-growing and distribution systems rather than supermarkets. Here in Sheffield, I have been lucky enough to get great Yorkshire cheese from local suppliers, and just this morning I got a fruit and veg box from a local cafe. These should be supplying schools, hospitals and prisons.

We also need to think about how food is grown. The noble Baroness, Lady Sheehan, referred to European workers doing the heavy lifting. In a report in the *Times*, an asparagus grower was quoted as saying, “British workers just won't do 12 hours a day of back-breaking work”. But I think that no one should be asked to do that. That means that we need a different kind of food system: small, market garden, biodiverse crops, which pretty well anyone could work on. That also means that we need reform of our land ownership. We need tens, even hundreds, of thousands of small businesses around our towns and cities, growing healthy food and supporting horticulture, building a different kind of food system that works for people and planet.

2.17 pm

**Lord Sheikh (Con):** My Lords, the pandemic has caused severe disruptions in our agriculture, fishery and dairy sectors, as well as the processing of foodstuffs. Furthermore, it has created difficulties in regard to the importation of food and beverages from abroad. We import about 47% of our food supplies from

different parts of the world. The pandemic has been worldwide, and a lot of countries have been affected. In addition, international transport systems have been severely impaired. However, we must give credit to our companies, which work hard to import food by cargo planes. We should also appreciate the efforts made by Heathrow and other airports.

Millions of people in the country are vulnerable, while others are in self-isolation. Given the undoubted difficulty for those people in going to shops, we must appreciate that supermarkets and other suppliers have put into practice ways of getting food to them. We should also pay tribute to a number of charities, organisations and individuals who have helped to provide food and provisions to people who are in need of assistance.

The farmers have problems in getting fruit and vegetable pickers. Can my noble friend the Minister say what help can be provided to farmers to find staff? I would like to see some revision to our Immigration Rules regarding this problem.

Finally, as someone who is particular about what he eats, I would like to see steps taken to encourage people to eat sensibly. That needs to be looked into further. Unfortunately, we have problems with obesity and illness, in both children and adults.

2.19 pm

**Baroness Bowles of Berkhamsted (LD):** My Lords, one farming subject that comes up regularly is the picking of crops and migrant workers—or the lack of them. The UK needs seasonal workers, and the permanent agricultural workforce relies heavily on EU labour. Brexit, minimum wages and the fall in sterling have already challenged this model of reliance, added to now by the coronavirus pandemic. There are sound business and environmental reasons to maximise self-sufficiency in food production, and within that, it is important to stress greater self-sufficiency in harvesting, which we know is difficult to do with UK workers.

The fourth industrial revolution offers exciting opportunities for farmers to increase productivity, protect the environment and make farming safer, but there is still hesitancy in the UK through a lack of technology training, a lack of capital finance and waiting for the next generation of development—alas, too often meaning development in other countries.

Robot picking technology has moved a long way already. In Spain, octopus-like robots pluck strawberries. In the US, machines vacuum apples off trees. Last year, UK trials on raspberry and strawberry pickers began, but the refrain remains that large-scale deployment, including to small farms, is 10 years away—the same as was estimated four years ago. With Brexit and the pandemic creating the perfect storm, will the Government make self-sufficiency in harvesting and mechanisation a priority, and bring down that 10-year horizon? This fits with investment in future-oriented technology and British high-tech manufacturing.

2.21 pm

**Lord Krebs (CB):** I thank my noble friend Lady Boycott for securing this debate.

We can survive without many things, but food is not one of them. I want to talk about hunger. After housing costs, 12.9 million people in this country,

including 3.7 million children, live in absolute poverty. In a rich country like ours, this is a shocking fact. Many of these people live in what is politely called “food insecurity”—in other words, they cannot afford to buy enough to eat. Remarkably, the Government do not measure this. They have no idea what the real number is, but it is almost certainly in the millions. As a result of Covid-19, that figure has almost certainly increased. As we have heard, the Food Foundation estimates that more than 8 million adults and 2 million children have gone hungry since lockdown.

One cause of food insecurity is the five-week delay in universal credit. This was acknowledged by Amber Rudd in February 2019 when she was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Further, and incredibly, the amount of money given out in benefits takes no account of the cost of buying food. According to government figures, since the lockdown, the number of applicants for universal credit has increased fivefold to 1.8 million—and the numbers are expected to rise still further. So, apart from all its other effects, Covid-19 will increase hunger and poor nutrition in this country. Can the Minister please explain what the Government plan to do about this totally unacceptable state of affairs?

2.23 pm

**The Duke of Wellington (Non-Aff):** My Lords, as always, I declare my agricultural interests as detailed in the register. This debate is extraordinarily timely because the Agriculture Bill passed the other place last night.

We should learn from Covid-19. Having left the European Union, now is a good moment to reconsider the strategic importance of food security. The coronavirus crisis has taught us to value more highly a number of essential parts of the nation’s life. During lockdown, only purchases of pharmaceuticals and food have been considered absolutely necessary. We now—correctly—consider farmers, farm workers and those who process and distribute food essential workers in a way that we have not done since the war.

We will never be self-sufficient in all food products, but it is surprising that we have a net trade deficit in meat products of £6 billion a year. It is precisely the livestock farmers who feel the most anxious at the moment. Our lamb producers, particularly in Wales and Scotland, need tariff and regulation-free access to the European market. Livestock farmers will suffer badly if we leave in December without a deal.

At the same time, the farming industry faces the prospect of a free trade agreement with the United States of America. The price for this may well be free American access to our food market. Present government policy is to support farmers for so-called public goods, but is not the provision of home-grown, quality food a public good? To increase food supply and food security in this country, the taxpayer should be prepared to support more home-grown, sustainable food production. Food security should now be a national priority.

2.25 pm

**Baroness Altmann (Con):** My Lords, I add my congratulations to the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, on securing this debate and on her excellent introduction. I also congratulate my noble friend the Minister and his department on the rapid and unprecedented support

for food retailers around the country, particularly in our most isolated communities. It is vital that our domestic food production capacity is supported over the long term to boost self-sufficiency.

Will my noble friend consider increased protection for food producers against oligopolistic or monopolistic practices, given recent evidence, for example, of possible profiteering by dominant suppliers during this crisis, suddenly altering terms of business or forcing farmers to accept prices below production costs? Will he consider security of food supplies for isolated, housebound elderly people who have sometimes struggled during the pandemic to obtain sufficient food, despite heroic efforts by volunteers, charities and neighbourhood groups who will not always know where the vulnerable people are? Therefore, will the Government consider encouraging, for example, the reintroduction of local meals-on-wheels services, which councils have withdrawn in recent years? Not only could this mean local authorities would readily know where the most vulnerable elderly people live in future pandemics, but delivery of meals would prevent some older people's health deteriorating, which could reduce the numbers needing NHS services or being forced to move into a care home.

Finally, I echo the words of other noble Lords that the Government should exempt agricultural workers from post-Brexit immigration restrictions, permitting short-term agricultural workers to enter the country freely in order to bolster our food self-sufficiency and help control rising food costs.

2.27 pm

**Lord McConnell of Glenscorrodale (Lab):** My Lords, I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, on her excellent introduction. I wholeheartedly endorse the comments of the noble Baroness, Lady Verma, about teaching young people more about food production and about cooking, and the comments of the noble Baroness, Lady McIntosh, about procurement and the need for more local sourcing and procurement rules and regulations. I shall make two points this afternoon. First, I think the last 10 days have shown us how a lack of co-ordination and proper decision-making between central government and the three devolved Governments of the UK can inhibit decision-making at a time of crisis. What progress has been made on setting up proper systems of decision-making involving the devolved Governments in agriculture and the environment, now that powers are being returned from Brussels to the United Kingdom?

Secondly, it is also important that we look at the vital importance of local, decentralised supply chains that would build more resilience into our food system. We also, of course, need to protect ecosystems and biodiversity and to ensure that the economic impacts of recession on households do not make the current situation worse. I believe that the sustainable development goals give us a framework in which the UK, internally as well as externally, can address these issues. What progress has been made on ensuring that the sustainable development goals, which are universal and not just for the developing world, can inform British decision-making in these vital areas and make sure that we have a more resilient and economically productive food system in operation in this country in the future?

2.29 pm

**Baroness Walmsley (LD):** My Lords, during the current crisis, people have become very focused on food. Families have been relying on food parcels from voluntary groups and food banks, which are particularly important for people whose children are not receiving free school lunches. They have very little food security, especially if they cannot go shopping because of having a vulnerable person at home. Others are realising that the best way to ensure food security is to grow your own, which also has the advantage of reducing food miles. Of course, this is available only to those with some outdoor space.

We are very reliant on our farmers and the horticultural industry. Both have been experiencing extreme difficulties during the lockdown. Many horticultural businesses which supply plants for garden centres lost their customers until this week, and their vegetable plants have been left to die. These losses have been disastrous for them. Can the Minister say what proportion of the industry has qualified for help under the Government's business support schemes and who is responsible for ensuring that we still have an industry after the pandemic crisis is over?

Farmers and salad growers had problems before the current crisis because, since we left the EU, workers from Europe have not been coming here in sufficient numbers to pick, pack and process the crops. No clear commitments have been given to these workers and no trade deals have yet been negotiated, so the security of homegrown fresh food is in a perilous state. Many Brits who volunteered to do the jobs left after a day because they found the work too hard and there is a limit to what can be done through automation, which of course also requires investment. Does the Minister agree that farmers will need a whole season to recover their businesses, so we need to extend the transition phase before they have to face the consequences of its end, and possibly tariffs?

2.31 pm

**Baroness Watkins of Tavistock (CB):** My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for securing this debate and for her excellent introduction. I fully concur with the content of her speech. As other noble Lords have said, there are challenges and opportunities for the food supply chain in the UK as a result of the measures associated with dealing with coronavirus that have been taken.

First, many shoppers have had to substitute for goods imported from abroad those that have been produced in the UK. For example, in my own local supermarket these include lamb from Cornwall and yoghurt made in Devon using British milk, which were previously available only in small local shops. However, this may well be because our producers are having difficulty exporting and are therefore supplying goods at cost.

Secondly, significant concern has been expressed in rural areas that the very welcome school food vouchers to the value of £15 a week must be used largely in supermarkets and that the Government should have developed a system that would enable them to be spent buying from small local producers. It can be costly and difficult to get to a supermarket when you live, as



I do, on Dartmoor in Devon. In principle, the vouchers could be used in local farm shops and stalls selling fresh vegetables, fruit, eggs and dairy products. Can the Minister tell the House whether the Government would be willing to consider these localised options for the use of school food vouchers, which may well assist not only the families and children in receipt of them but local agricultural food producers?

Furthermore, the lack of tourism is challenging local industries. Can the Minister explain how support will be increased to suppliers who have traditionally supplied to hotels and restaurant chains?

2.33 pm

**Lord Arbuthnot of Edrom (Con):** My Lords, I declare my interests as set out in the register, in particular as a director of Gusbourne Estate and as chairman of Electricity Resilience. My remarks will be devoted to panic buying. People have come in for a lot of stick for it, but panic buying is the perfectly natural consequence of two things: the just-in-time supply system combined with our refusal to contemplate the fact that bad things happen. That refusal is itself the natural result of decades of security, prosperity and, I am afraid, complacency and short-sightedness.

Just-in-time supply was introduced by Toyota to improve efficiency, and it has done so across the world—but at the cost of resilience. We need to strike a better balance between efficiency and resilience and to stop living on the edge of things going wrong. I do hope that the coronavirus has taught us that lesson.

Secondly, we must contemplate and discuss bad things happening. Here we can learn a lesson from Sweden. A Swedish brochure, *If Crisis or War Comes*, sent to all five million households in Sweden advises citizens to store staples such as potatoes, eggs, pasta and canned beans. If we did that, there would be no panic buying and no need for it. I am delighted that our Government in the UK is now talking to its citizens about the risks they face, and I look forward to seeing more of it.

2.35 pm

**Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick (Non-Affl):** My Lords, I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, on her very comprehensive overview of the situation in relation to food security and food resilience. However, for me, this debate poses the question: how secure was our food system prior to Covid? There are many challenges and opportunities, and our food system has been impacted by several factors, including Brexit, climate change and, now, Covid, which have changed our landscape, no more so than over the last five years.

However, there are some warning signals for the Minister. I urge him not to close off other European markets—a point made by the noble Baroness, Lady Quin. We are dependent on those markets for the fruit and vegetables that are not available in the UK and Ireland in winter because of our temperate climatic conditions. We rely on France, southern Spain and Italy for salad-type vegetables.

The other issue that I want to refer to was raised by the noble Lords, Lord Empey and Lord Purvis—Northern Ireland export/import issues to do with the implementation of the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol. We in Northern

Ireland rely on imports and exports across the Irish Sea, so it is important that there is no border there in terms of Brexit and Covid, as that would present us with difficulties and challenges. Therefore, will the Minister ensure unfettered access for our food suppliers and food supplies? Finally, can the Minister see whether it would be possible to amend the Agriculture Bill, which is currently before us, to ensure that it reflects good standards and good public health standards?

2.38 pm

**Baroness Scott of Needham Market (LD):** In 2014, the EU Sub-Committee which I was chairing at the time held an inquiry into food waste, the first ever such inquiry in Parliament. It was very much a reflection of our concern that around a third of the food that we produce for human consumption ends up being thrown away. Since then, the issue has certainly come up the agenda, but it has remained a very difficult nut to crack.

For UK households, the problem is intention. People recognise that it is a problem, but they say that they have a lack of knowledge, their shopping habits perhaps encourage food waste, and the behaviour of retailers almost certainly does.

The leader in this field, WRAP, has just reported after two weeks of lockdown. It has found that people are shopping much less because they do not want to risk going into stores, but they are buying more, and of course people are eating out very much less than they were before. Therefore, the incentive now is not just time and money; it is people's safety. They have begun to do all the things that we have advised, such as planning meals, checking stocks and making lists, managing portion sizes and using their freezer. WRAP has found that one in three households is now throwing away less and only one in 25 is throwing away more. Crucially, WRAP has found a clear correlation between those throwing away less and those who recalled seeing information from campaigns such as Love Food Hate Waste.

Therefore, I now ask the Government to work with WRAP to really ramp up practical advice that will help households save money now but also, crucially, will help to instil a lasting behaviour change going forward. In this way, we can reap the environmental benefits of reducing the emissions and water footprint of the food that we throw away. This is a one-off chance to change behaviour for good, especially in younger people, and we should not miss it.

2.40 pm

**Lord Mountevans (CB):** My Lords, I add my congratulations to the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, but I want to focus on the physical supply chain for much of the nation's food. Defra estimates that 50% of our food and feed arrives by sea ports. If noble Lords started their day with a cup of tea or coffee, or a glass of orange juice, it came by sea. The role of shipping and our ports is absolutely fundamental to our food supply. Here I should declare my interest as a council member and former chairman of Maritime UK.

Despite enormous challenges, the industry has done an incredible job in maintaining food deliveries to the nation and, along with others, to the supermarkets.

Despite profound difficulties to do with crew changes and the collapse of passenger traffic on ferries, the shipping sector has delivered, keeping the country supplied. However, the crisis and the wider disruption to international trade has resulted in a large number of sea ferry and shore staff being furloughed.

The port sector has demonstrated magnificent operational resilience during the crisis. It has been operating with social distancing so far as possible since the earliest days, with absences in the low single-figure percentages, and impressive flexibility in ways of working, much of it helped by management and local trade union reps working together constructively.

The sector has been very fortunate in the help it has received from the Government, and I pay tribute here. Key-worker status was of course critical and furloughing a lifeline. Financial support for some shipping companies has eased the pressure, and the UK Government have been at the forefront of trying to assist in easing crew change problems. These measures have been deeply appreciated, but this is a fast-moving crisis and we now need to look to the future if we are to retain the ability to supply food and other essentials under all conditions.

The ports are now experiencing falling activity, with vessel calls down 25% to 30% as the initial surge for goods such as food has eased and industrial and consumer demand has fallen. The financial challenge for them is compounded by the difficulties of customers and tenants struggling to pay bills. The ports want to return to their previous high levels of investment and the Government can play an important role at zero to low cost to the public purse through adjusting regulations in areas such as planning and capital allowances.

2.42 pm

**Lord Duncan of Springbank (Con):** My Lords, this is a timely debate and I echo the thanks that noble Lords have expressed to the noble Baroness. I was struck by the remarks of the noble and learned Lord, Lord Hope, when he spoke of the berry bus that toured the estates in Scotland. I too was a victim of its pursuit—although in my case it was a berry van—and many was the morning I woke up praying for rain and being disappointed by sunshine.

Picking raspberries is never a pleasure, I am afraid. It is a serious job. Over the last few years, we have relied on the migrant workers who come to do it. Latterly however, even before Brexit reared its head, it was becoming harder and harder to bring people across the water to pick those berries. The principal reason was competition from countries such as Germany, Italy and Spain, which were offering incentives for migrant workers to do exactly the same thing, with not berries but hops, grapes or other market garden products.

We had a challenge and we now have a new challenge, namely the Covid virus. The test we therefore have to meet is how we will harvest into the future. We have a trial run this year because of Covid, but the simple questions remain: who will pick our raspberries in the future and how will we ensure that they are harvested well? It is no longer enough to rely just on hope and wish; we need to pull together a plan. This plan must encourage people to undertake labour in this area and recognise the value that it has to local communities.

It will not be an easy plan, because some of these tasks are simply not as pleasant as they might sound to those who occasionally pick a raspberry for a nice spot of lunch. For those who do it all day, it is a seriously challenging endeavour. Will the Minister give serious thought to how we might achieve such a strategic plan to help harvest this area?

2.44 pm

**Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe (Lab):** My Lords, I am grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for such an all-embracing and spirited introduction to this debate. I greatly sympathise with the Minister's having to endeavour to reply to all the contributions that have been made. I declare an interest as patron of Sugarwise, a charity committed to reducing sugar in food and drinks and encouraging manufacturers to produce healthy foods within the World Health Organization's sugar guidelines.

The noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, raised obesity, diabetes and hypertension as issues that have been brought to the forefront as underlying causes of Covid-19 deaths. When we come out of this, we must return to the inadequacy of policies linked to obesity and diabetes and seek ways in which we can strengthen them and encourage our population to move away from what is causing those difficulties.

Much of it comes back to what we eat and drink. A major factor there, which only reluctantly have the Government moved towards addressing, is sugar. I am grateful that they eventually introduced the sugar tax, recognising that there was a significant problem, particularly as it affects children through fizzy drinks. But it affects the whole population, and we need a review to look in a wider way than we have ever done before and address the problems that arise from sugar consumption. My question is a simple one: will the Government review their attitude to sugar and recognise that it is a major factor causing significant problems? Many people would not have died had they not suffered from diabetes and obesity, which come from eating sugar over their lifetimes.

2.47 pm

**Baroness Tyler of Enfield (LD):** My Lords, as we have heard, food security is a global issue as well as a national and local one. The Covid crisis has exposed the fragility of global supply chains and the importance of investing in resilient supply chains to help meet future global shocks. At the local level, councils have been working hard supporting vulnerable people to access food throughout the pandemic, and we have heard a lot about supermarkets but should not overlook the essential role of local shops, providing an estimated 600,000 deliveries per week in their communities.

Food insecurity has become a way of life for far too many of our fellow citizens. The Food Foundation estimates that 8 million adults have experienced food insecurity since the start of lockdown, 5 million people in the UK households with children were experiencing food insecurity after just one month, and more than 200,000 children have had to skip meals. Prior to the pandemic, a significant minority of households were struggling to access healthy food and were relying on food banks and other community-based food projects.

The Trussell Trust estimates an 80% increase in the number of people supported by emergency food parcels in its network compared with last year. Food banks have had to make changes to the way in which they work to stay open and stay safe while coping with a large increase in demand. I spoke yesterday to a local vicar who had witnessed a fourfold increase in food parcels at her food bank, but where volunteers had been queueing in supermarkets because they have been unable to make bulk purchases of essential items online. Surely supermarkets could make special arrangements for food banks, as for other vulnerable groups.

These food banks are doing an excellent job, but surely our aim should be that no one needs to rely on one. Anti-poverty charities have been calling for a time-limited coronavirus emergency income support scheme to prevent people from falling into serious financial hardship. Building on the welcome increase in the universal credit standard allowance, that could include temporary measures to lift the benefit cap, including the two-child limit, suspending the five-week waiting period for the first payment, and repayment of advances. I join the noble Lord, Lord Krebs, in asking the Minister what steps the Government are taking to ensure that people most in need are supported to put food on the table during this crisis.

2.49 pm

**Baroness Bull (CB):** My Lords, there are 1 million people on the Government's clinically vulnerable list but nearly 14 million people living with disabilities. That is 21% of the UK population. They fall outside high-risk categories, yet need, and are entitled to, support in accessing the food that they require.

The current legal action of more than 300 people against major supermarket chains suggests that they are not receiving this, and that these problems are systemic, not a series of one-offs. Examples cited include difficulties in accessing delivery slots; visually impaired shoppers being refused support from sighted guides and wheelchair users being denied help; long queues excluding people with mobility issues or chronic pain conditions; and the impact of purchasing limits on people with autism, who often experience rigidity around foods. Doing without our usual brands might not be a problem for many of us, but for people with autism it can make the difference between eating and going hungry.

The collective action argues that supermarkets are obliged under the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities, but the British Retail Consortium has said that its primary aim is "to ensure clinically shielded groups identified by Government could easily access food without added risks to their health."

This excludes disabled people, contravening rights and leaving them unable to access the food that they require.

The kindness of neighbours and strangers may well define these times as we look back in years to come, but although home deliveries from government, charities, family and friends are welcome, people with disabilities have a right to independent living. I acknowledge the efforts of supermarkets and their staff to keep the nation fed during this pandemic, but can the Minister commit the Government to supporting

them in ensuring that temporary procedures in place during this extraordinary period are fair and inclusive to all?

2.52 pm

**Lord Blencathra (Con):** My Lords, I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, on securing this important debate.

I have no worries about food security in this country. We will always have more than enough—except fish, possibly—but we might not get what we want all year round. I do not particularly want a choice of 20 different lettuces in January, nor Moroccan strawberries for Christmas. I believe in eating UK-produced food in season when it is a delicacy and a treat. Nothing from anywhere else in the world can beat it for taste, not to mention food miles. In that regard, will my noble friend the Minister give all his encouragement and support to those excellent initiatives to create massive glasshouses near sewage plants, where they can get cheap heat? We have the capability to supply a huge range of more produce grown under glass in this country. I look forward to the report from Henry Dimbleby on a food strategy, which should address these issues.

Will the Minister also give encouragement to agricultural innovation and technology, as articulated by the noble Baroness, Lady Bowles? This has had a huge boost in the USA because President Trump has curtailed cheap foreign labour from planting and picking crops. We must go this way in the near future too, rather than toward a permanent supply of cheap EU labour.

I come to fish, where I am worried about supply. The common fisheries policy is quite evil and destructive of this finest of natural resources. I want a cast-iron assurance from my noble friend that we will not sell out our fishermen, that we will take back full control of our fishing waters, that we will impose our own catch limitation so that we conserve and increase stocks, and that any deal with the EU will be on an annual basis.

Finally, in these dire times, let us raise a glass to the English wine industry, which is a superb example of innovation. English champagnes and white wines are beating the French in international wine tastings. What is more, vineyards are excellent for wildlife in that they are not being ploughed up every year—a good example of not digging for victory.

2.53 pm

**Baroness Young of Old Scone (Lab):** I thank the Deputy Speaker for letting me have a second go after I sounded like a Dalek the first time round. I thank the House broadcasting staff for their help.

The Covid crisis has revealed how fragile our food supply chains are in this country and how we need to increase our food self-sufficiency. I guess we will never be able to grow pineapples in Kent, but climate change will make food supply chains even more fragile, as the climate change committee recently reported. Before we make decisions on producing more of our own food, we need to consider the other demands for land: for carbon sequestration; to reverse the biodiversity

crisis; for built development; for energy; and for access and recreation, which we all now know is so vital for physical and mental health.

The University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership found that, to meet a growing UK population's land use needs, we require a third more land than we currently have in the UK, so any policy of more home-produced food needs to be in the context of a land use strategy for England to set the framework for how we will optimise these competing land use requirements. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have such strategies but the Government in England are very late to this issue. Gosh, that rings a bell, does it not?

We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity post Brexit to shape our own agricultural policy to be fit for a new, post-Covid future. Central to that must be food produced sustainably, working with the environment to make food production more resilient, rooted in local economies and produced to high environmental, animal welfare and food safety standards—not Trump's trade deal standards. The Agriculture Bill needs to embed these principles. I commend to the Minister the reports of the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, of which I am a commissioner. They well demonstrate the case for restorative agriculture and a land-use framework for the future.

2.55 pm

**Lord West of Spithead (Lab):** My Lords, I too thank the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for raising this debate and for her wise words at the beginning.

Covid-19 has brought into stark relief a number of things that we had taken for granted. One of them is food supply. It is extraordinary that our nation should need reminding about the strategic significance of food supply: in two world wars we fought long and hard to ensure that we had enough food in this country because we could not produce enough. Luckily, our merchant marine and the Navy managed to keep us supplied. In the First World War, part of the reason for the German collapse was that we stopped them getting food supplies and their nation collapsed.

There is a very real need for us to be self-sufficient in food in this country. A number of measures are needed to ensure that we achieve that. Noble Lords have addressed a number of those issues and they are very important. The noble Lord, Lord Blencathra, raised the issue of fish. I agree with him but, my goodness, if we are to protect our waters for fish—noble Lords will not be surprised to hear me say this—we actually need more ships. That is the only way that we will be able to achieve it.

I know that the Minister feels strongly about this and he has been very helpful in the House on a number of these issues, but we need to focus on self-sufficiency in food. What are all the measures we can take to ensure that we achieve that? We also need resilience in the supply chain, which is not as strong as some people think. I am reminded of the ice storm in Montreal in the late 1990s, when power cuts stopped cash machines and so on being used. There were then riots because people could not get to food. Food is an absolute necessity for our people; we must get it right.

2.58 pm

**Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville (LD):** My Lords, I too congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, on securing this vital debate and agree with all her comments. The number of speakers is an indication of the concern felt by the House over the security of food supply. We have had a wide-ranging debate; it is clear that there are real problems with the production, harvesting and distribution of food during the current Covid-19 pandemic.

The Government have expressed confidence in the resilience of the UK food supply chain. As many noble Lords have mentioned, only 53% of the food consumed in the UK was produced here, with 28% coming from the EU. The import and export figures for 2017 demonstrate that we were wholly reliant on imports for all vital foods. It is only in beverages that our exports overtake our imports, solely due to Scotch whisky. It is not wise to be so dependent on imports for our basic food.

Food distribution is fragile as a result of the pandemic. Air freight mainly containing food continues to be flown into the UK on cargo planes. During normal operations, Heathrow Airport usually handles 47 cargo-only planes per week. In contrast, on 31 March, the airport was forced to handle 48 cargo-only planes in a single day. The food miles involved here are horrendous. Can the Minister say whether the Government are considering a review of our just-in-time supply chain? Are they considering using supermarkets to buy more food from local suppliers? This would reduce food miles, be better for the environment and involve less processing.

We have heard from many contributors about customer access. Data from the Food Foundation this month shows that approximately 500,000 children entitled to free school meals have received no substitutes since March. This is 31% of entitled children. Food poverty is a terrible scourge. Vouchers for food, concentrated on large supermarkets, have been spasmodic and in some areas non-existent. Government departments apparently had insufficient capacity to widen the number of retailers participating. As mentioned by the noble Baroness, Lady Watkins, this has left many children in rural areas without access to food. Only two supermarkets will take vouchers online. Can the Minister say why smaller, local shops were excluded from the voucher scheme?

I regret to say that, in my own area, the experience of schools was that the Department for Education was in chaos and teachers were tearing their hair out, with it taking three weeks to issue vouchers. In the end, Somerset County Council came up trumps and produced boxes of food to the same value of the vouchers and delivered them to the homes of the vulnerable entitled children. Given that schools are not returning to full attendance immediately, can the Minister say whether the capacity in government departments has increased to distribute the vouchers efficiently and whether the Government intend to widen the variety of retail food outlets where vouchers can be exchanged?

As others have said, local shops operate at the heart of our communities and across every type of location: villages, housing estates, petrol forecourts and high streets. Some 38% of local shops are located in isolated

areas with no other businesses nearby. Before the Covid-19 outbreak, only 12% of convenience stores were providing a home delivery services for groceries. A recent survey found that 38% of local shops had introduced a home delivery service in the light of the outbreak. It is now estimated that this sector is making 600,000 home deliveries per week. This proves that our more local facilities are capable of stepping up to the challenge.

Supermarkets have also sought to increase food availability for consumers by introducing extended operating hours for over-70s and key workers and by increasing the number of delivery slots available. However, the vulnerable are still struggling to get online delivery slots. An elderly couple I know could not get a slot for three weeks. There was no local shop in their village and, because of their age and health, they were isolating.

Since the start of the outbreak, as others have said, food banks have seen a surge in demand, the Trussell Trust noting an 81% increase in demand in the last two weeks of March. While the Government are to be congratulated on their efforts to provide food parcels to the most vulnerable residents, there has been criticism that they do not contain healthy items, as mentioned by many noble Lords.

Independent Age conducted a survey of extremely vulnerable groups. Some 29% of respondents who get food parcels felt there was insufficient food included to sustain them until the next delivery. Some 23% felt that their dietary needs were not being met, as issues concerning medical, dietary and religious requirements were not considered. Does the Minister consider that working with local authorities to better co-ordinate distribution of food parcels would be more efficient and prevent people at risk having to skip meals or go hungry until their next delivery? Will he investigate the composition of the food parcels to ensure a healthy mix of food, including fresh produce, and ensure that food parcels meet individual medical, dietary or religious requirements at no extra cost to the recipients?

In dairy, the AHDB estimates that overall demand for dairy products is currently running at around 2 million litres per day lower than before the lockdown. In poultry meat, pre-lockdown the estimated weekly demand from McDonald's, KFC and Nando's was collectively in the region of 2 million chickens per week. Farming systems are biological in nature; they cannot be easily turned off and on. I welcome the Government's announcement on 6 May of new funding to support dairy farmers, who will be able to access up to £10,000 each to cover 70% of their lost income during April and May. Will this additional support be continued beyond the end of May?

The Agriculture Bill is a vital step towards a more resilient system. The proposed move towards "public money for public goods" at the core of the Bill will enable farmers to restore the natural environment alongside and through the production of healthy, sustainable and nutritious food. It will also improve animal health, minimising the risk of future zoonotic outbreaks of disease, and enhance people's access to green space, the importance of which has come into even sharper focus through the lockdown.

I turn to highly-seasonal farm labour. It is estimated that around 70,000 workers are needed this year—many noble Lords have referred to this. According to the NFU labour survey, the majority will arrive between April and September. On 6 March 2019, the Government implemented a pilot scheme to allow fruit and vegetable farmers to employ migrant workers for a period of up to six months. The scheme was capped at 2,500 workers as part of a two-year trial. In February, the scheme was extended to 10,000 workers. As of 1 January next year, the distinction between EU and non-EU seasonal worker migrants will cease and the current 10,000 figure is far short of the 70,000 seasonal workers currently deployed. January 2021 is only eight months away, with no clarity as to how the seasonal workers scheme is to be expanded. Are there plans to extend this scheme beyond January 2021?

Through the Covid-19 crisis, we are seeing the UK used as a dumping ground for agricultural products from other countries that have lost their own markets. Goods produced to much lower standards than would be allowed in the UK have a distorting effect on the domestic industry. What are the Government doing to prevent this continuing and what is their long-term strategy for food security, to move towards healthy food and away from processed foods?

3.07 pm

**Baroness Jones of Whitchurch (Lab):** My Lords, I am grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for tabling this debate today. She has set out in stark terms the immediate and longer-term challenges facing our food supply in the UK, and other noble Lords have added considerable knowledge and expertise to the debate.

Since the outbreak was confirmed, our Front Bench has been in regular contact with farmers, manufacturers, supermarkets, unions and food charities, which have all had to take emergency action to respond to the challenge before them. Tremendous progress has been made in keeping supply chains moving. I pay tribute to everyone who has played a part, particularly the front-line staff who have worked in difficult and, often, potentially dangerous environments.

Inevitably, with change on such a scale, potential problems remain. I want to highlight some of those this afternoon. As many noble Lords have pointed out, food poverty remains the number one challenge. The lockdown created two categories of those needing help: the shielded vulnerable, who were instructed to remain at home because of health concerns, and the economically vulnerable, whose loss of income left them unable to feed their families. It is this latter group who still need urgent help. As the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, pointed out, the recent Food Foundation report highlighted a sorry state of affairs where 5 million people were experiencing food insecurity, including 2 million children—many of whom are skipping meals. Polling undertaken since the lockdown suggests that as many as 8 million adults are struggling to access food.

Local councils are doing their best to reach out to the most vulnerable, and I pay credit to their work. Food banks are doing a fantastic job in difficult circumstances. They are desperately working to plug the gap and have switched much of their resources to

food parcel deliveries to those in financial hardship. We obviously welcome the Government's latest announcement of £16 million to support the food charity sector and get help to those most in need.

However, does the Minister accept, as many noble Lords have said, that the solution lies in resolving the welfare benefit crisis, such as the five-week universal credit wait, that is causing such financial hardship in the first place? Can he explain what is being done to solve the school meal voucher fiasco, where the Edenred scheme seems unable to provide families with their promised vouchers efficiently? There are reports that schools and individual teachers have been calling on families in hardship, with food parcels paid out of their own money. That cannot be right.

Secondly, there have inevitably been problems with food production and distribution. Thankfully, some of those have now been resolved as people have stopped panic buying. But the unions continue to report problems with staff in food manufacturing and supermarkets being asked, for example, to work without appropriate PPE or on production lines with inadequate social distancing measures. What engagement has Defra had with the food sector unions, which would be able to describe first hand the unacceptable experiences that some of their members still have to face?

The crisis has also highlighted some more fundamental problems in the supply chain. We have been reminded by a number of noble Lords that the UK is only 53% self-sufficient in food and drink, and over a quarter of our food is supplied by the EU. While most of those imports are still getting through, our reliance on food and vegetable trucks coming across from Europe reminds us of the importance of striking the right Brexit deal.

The lockdown has highlighted the need for more local food production but, as many noble Lords have highlighted, there is a real challenge in recruiting UK seasonal workers, which means that we are in danger of relying more, not less, on imported goods. The Government have sought to reassure us that our crops will be harvested, but the press are reporting a very low take-up of jobs via the Pick for Britain scheme and an understandable reluctance of potential recruits to sign up for seasonal contracts—some of which are many months long—when they might be expected back at work with their prime employer. Can the Minister update us on how many UK recruits have signed up via this scheme; what proportion of pickers this year are expected to be eastern European, and what arrangements are being made to ensure that they can travel here safely; and whether there is indeed any danger of crops being left to rot because of a lack of workers?

Meanwhile, the crisis in parts of the dairy industry showed how vulnerable farmers were to a drop in milk demand, and the control of powerful processors such as Freshways to drive the price down. The Government's initial response was to encourage a voluntary, market-led solution, which turned out to be inadequate in the face of all the evidence. While we welcome the fact that a new government bailout scheme for dairy farmers was announced last week, does the Minister accept that it took far longer than was necessary to provide some reassurance for the sector? Can he explain how the

adequacy of the scheme will be monitored and adjusted as necessary? Does he recognise that dairy farmers need better contractual protection in the longer term to avoid similar crises in the future?

There is an irony in the current crisis that while many people are feeling particularly patriotic, many of the supermarkets continue to import cheap dairy, meat and poultry products from abroad, at the expense of the quality products grown by British farmers. Does the Minister accept that government and retailers could do more at this critical time to promote British food, which would in turn support the livelihoods of British farmers? Could the public sector procurement policies be amended to give priority to locally sourced produce—for example, as people have suggested, in prisons, hospitals and schools—as happens in many other countries?

Today, we are addressing short-term pressures, but this crisis gives us a real opportunity for a radical rethink of our food supply and security priorities going forward. We very much look forward to debating the Agriculture Bill, which I hope will come to the Lords shortly. It is as clear as ever that the country's food system is broken and in need of urgent reform. There is an opportunity to put environmental good practice, a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and a local food strategy at the heart of the Bill.

We support the notion of farm payments rewarding the delivery of public good. A strong UK farming sector, based on sustainable farming, will give us the opportunity to reverse the declining percentage of UK-grown food consumed in the UK. A legal guarantee of future high animal welfare and environmental standards would protect UK consumers, while protecting British farmers at risk of being undercut by poor-quality imports. It is of considerable regret that the Government did not support our amendment to this effect in the Agriculture Bill yesterday, but I am sure we will return to this when the Bill comes to the Lords.

In the meantime, strategies to encourage changing diets and less food waste will help us to meet our climate change adaptation obligations, as well as help people to live healthier lives. The Fisheries Bill, which is currently being considered in the Lords, will provide the opportunity to revitalise the UK fishing sector, with sustainable fishing and marine conservation also at its heart.

We have been facing up to some difficult challenges in our food and farming sectors today. These problems will undoubtedly remain with us for the foreseeable future. But I hope we can also recognise that there is an alternative future for our food system that can give us some hope and optimism. I hope we will be able to debate that in fuller terms when the Agriculture Bill comes before us in due course.

3.16 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Lord Gardiner of Kimble) (Con):** My Lords, I declare my farming interests as set out in the register. Food supply and food security are of the greatest importance at all times; in the context of this current unprecedented challenge, they are extremely critical. I am therefore extremely grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Boycott, for securing this debate.

As the noble Lord, Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe, said, it will not be possible for me to address now all the points that noble Lords have made during this thought-provoking three-hour debate. I shall of course pick up on all the points that have been made and reply fully.

I join noble Lords, in particular my noble friends Lady Altmann and Lord Holmes of Richmond, in paying tribute to all those across the food industry for their momentous efforts to help feed the nation. They are providing a vital service and the response has been remarkable. They have been working hard to keep food flowing into stores and people's houses. We can be enormously proud of, and grateful to, all those businesses, large and small, and their employees, who have stepped up to create innovative solutions to ensure that people have the food they need. I am particularly grateful to the noble Baronesses, Lady Mallalieu and Lady Randerson, for raising small shops, and indeed to the noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville, for mentioning delivery services from not only shops but pubs and takeaways, which many of us have witnessed. I am also most grateful to my noble friend Lord Lucas for recognising the work that civil servants and officials have undertaken, and for emphasising the importance of the experience they bring.

This has been a very difficult time for many, particularly vulnerable people. The Government have been working extremely closely with industry and across civic society. Industry has adapted quickly to changes in demand. Food supply into and across the United Kingdom remains resilient, and the general supply situation for most goods is returning to normal.

The Government have worked quickly to introduce new measures to make sure that businesses can continue to keep food supply flowing. These measures include extending delivery hours to supermarkets and flexing rules on drivers' hours to allow a higher frequency of deliveries to stores. We have temporarily relaxed elements of competition law, allowing retailers to co-operate in the national interest to keep shops stocked. We have also designated employees involved in food production as key workers. These interventions give the sector the flexibility it needs to ensure that food reaches people in a rapidly changing situation. On competition law, I say to the noble Lord, Lord Grantchester, that the CMA has created a dedicated Covid-19 task force to identify any of the sorts of issues he mentioned. I would be happy to pass on any particular points for him.

The noble Baroness, Lady Jones of Whitchurch, and many other noble Lords raised the issue of the crisis falling hardest on certain parts of society. I want to emphasise this because I have witnessed it: the Government are working extremely hard with others to ensure that everyone can safely access nutritious food. With reference to the economically vulnerable, on 8 May we announced £16 million of funding from DCMS to ensure that food is available to critical front-line services supporting vulnerable people. This includes a food charity grant scheme to provide food to some of the most economically vulnerable people. Applicants must confirm they will aim to use food funded under this grant to provide or contribute towards—I emphasise—nutritionally balanced meals

in alignment with the *Eatwell Guide*. We work with FareShare, WRAP, other charitable organisations, DWP and MHCLG to help at least 5,000 front-line charities—a point that the noble Baronesses, Lady Janke and Lady Tyler, made.

I say to the noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville, that schools can make food parcel or gift voucher arrangements with any local or national supplier that they consider appropriate. I will take back the points that have been made so that I can have a discussion with the Department for Education.

To address the needs of clinically and economically vulnerable people who do not have a wider support network to help them secure food or who are unable physically to go to supermarkets, we have developed a shielding scheme. We have so far identified more than 2 million clinically extremely vulnerable people in England. Where they do not have a support network, we are ensuring an uninterrupted supply of food. Wherever shielding individuals let the Government know that they are having trouble accessing food, their details are passed on to supermarkets, which put them at the front of the queue for online delivery slots. We are arranging for them to receive packages of essential supplies delivered directly to their doorstep. They are designed to deliver the nutritional requirements—I emphasise this issue as the noble Baronesses, Lady Boycott and Lady Bakewell, raised it—of one person for one week and have been reviewed by nutritionists. To date, more than 1 million food parcels have been delivered in England. It is the biggest effort to deliver supplies to those in need since the Second World War. I am grateful for what my noble friend Lady Altmann said in this regard.

The noble Baroness, Lady Bowles, raised this point, and I want to emphasise that we are working to support others who need help with food supplies, including the elderly, the disabled, blind people, people self-isolating, people with pre-existing health conditions following enhanced self-distancing and people who normally rely on food deliveries by supermarkets or support networks. I say to the noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell, that we are working closely with local authorities, businesses and charities to help this group access food through food deliveries from local retailers, wholesalers and food businesses. We have also worked with supermarkets to increase access to priority delivery for click-and-collect slots. This group can also refer themselves or a family member to NHS Volunteer Responders. I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the almost 600,000 people who have come forward and are working on shopping for food and essential supplies on behalf of vulnerable people.

The noble Lord, Lord Alton, and the noble Baronesses, Lady Scott of Needham Market and Lady Jones of Whitchurch, referred to food waste. There is much on this that I would wish to discuss, but we should record that during this time WRAP has said that food waste has been reduced by nearly one-third. That is a lesson to be learned. I also endorse what my noble friend Lord Caithness said about hard-working farmers—I want to mention the fishing industry here, too—who maintain the supply of products which form an essential part of many household diets.

My noble friend Lord Shewsbury mentioned eggs. I say to him, and I will take this back, that it is a requirement to include the country of origin and farming requirements on eggs. We welcome all parts of the food chain when they promote and source British products. I am aware of WTO matters but I am happy to say to your Lordships, and more widely, that I always seek to buy British and will always encourage others to buy British food and drink. My noble friend Lady Redfern was joined by my noble friend Lord Taylor of Holbeach in championing not only Lincolnshire but food production at home.

The noble Baroness, Lady Watkins, raised the new fund to help support those dairy farmers who have seen decreased demand due to the loss of market in the food service sector. The new fund will provide support for those most in need. Eligible dairy farmers in England who have lost more than 25% of their income over April and May will be entitled to up to £10,000 each, to cover 70% of their lost income during those months. I will take back the points about any further months thereafter.

I am pleased that the noble Baroness, Lady Jones of Whitchurch, and my noble friend Lord Blencathra raised fishing. A £10 million support package for England's fishing and aquaculture sectors was announced on 17 April to secure the sustainability of the English fishing industry. It is also important to say that Defra and Seafish are working closely on the "Sea For Yourself" campaign to promote seafood species caught in UK waters. I emphasise to my noble friend Lord Blencathra, and reaffirm, our intention to be an independent coastal state with all that that commands. Other support includes the business interruption loans and temporary competition law exemption, allowing the dairy industry to share information and work together.

My noble friend Lady McIntosh has been a champion of our farmers and producers and we ourselves continue to champion them. We are supporting them to grow more great British food and to provide a reliable, sustainable and nutritious food supply to the British public.

The noble Baroness, Lady Bowles, raised the importance of improving the productivity of agricultural and horticultural activity. The Agriculture Bill will allow us to provide financial assistance in these matters. This includes support to increase the productivity of fruit and vegetables.

On a point raised by the noble Baroness, Lady Meacher, we want the entire supply chain to help deliver healthier food and encourage healthy eating. This point was also made by the noble Lord, Lord Patel. Our National Food Strategy will build on the Agriculture Bill to help ensure that our food system delivers healthy and affordable food for all, built on a resilient and sustainable agriculture sector. This point was raised by the noble Baronesses, Lady Bakewell and Lady Jones of Whitchurch, and my noble friend Lord Caithness. We will also ensure that the Bill sets out our plans to reward farmers for, among other things, safeguarding the nation's high welfare standards.

I say to my noble friend the Duke of Wellington and the noble Baroness, Lady Jones of Whitchurch, that we are leading on different initiatives to promote

British produce. This includes Defra's "Food is GREAT" campaign, while the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board recently launched a new marketing campaign to increase supplies of milk, funded jointly with Defra, the devolved Administrations and Dairy UK. We also have campaigns under way to promote beef and pork, with a further campaign on lamb to come.

I endorse my noble friend Lord Blencathra's words on the importance of innovation. On another point raised by the noble Baroness, Lady Bowles, and the noble Lord, Lord Patel, anyone going to Harper Adams will see the extraordinary work going on there, for instance. Since 2013, the Government have funded an agritech strategy with £160 million and the recent industrial strategy challenge fund with £90 million, transforming food production. Defra is now developing an ambitious industry-driven R&D package.

My noble friend Lord Taylor of Holbeach, the noble Lord, Lord Cameron of Dillington, and the noble Baroness, Lady Young of Old Scone, raised a really important point. Farming, the environment and rural resilience are a complete jigsaw puzzle. It is not about separate silos; all of it is absolutely intrinsic—another point that my noble friend Lord Lucas raised.

Seasonal labour was raised by many noble Lords, including my noble friend Lord Naseby. Indeed, the noble Lord, Lord Ramsbotham, also mentioned prisoners: Defra is working with the MoJ on the temporary release licence scheme for agricultural work. I am most grateful to the noble Lord for raising that. It was also raised by the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of St Albans, the noble Baronesses, Lady Quin, Lady Parminter and Lady Sheehan, and many other noble Lords.

There has been a strong response from thousands of British people expressing their interest in agricultural work in the coming months. Work is currently in hand on the government/industry digital hub "Pick for Britain". We think that, for some of the early weeks, labour has been covered, but we are conscious that from the end of this month and beyond we need ever more people to come forward. We are working on the promotion of the website. I say to the noble and learned Lord, Lord Hope of Craighead, that there will be students. My noble friend Lord Duncan of Springbank and the noble Lord, Lord McNicol, know very well that this is hard work and we are very conscious that we will need to encourage British people to come forward. That is what we intend to do and we very much hope that those who are able to come from overseas can do so as well.

On the issue of self-sufficiency, obviously self-sufficiency does not equate to overall food security, however important increasing British production is. My noble friend Lady Verma and the noble Lord, Lord McConnell, referred to communities across the world—many vulnerable communities—where we will want to import from, and sustainably. We continue to monitor closely the impacts of the outbreak on international supply chains, including any disruption to freight transport, borders, production and trade. At present, all short-term risks have stabilised and we have a free flow of goods along the international supply chain. We will continue to co-operate with international partners to ensure



that the UK continues to receive vital supplies of food and other critical goods. We are working with the Department for International Trade and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to ensure that we maintain close ties internationally and monitor any risks that may arise. I believe that we will have a very close relationship with our EU friends and partners. This is work in progress and I am confident that there will be a successful result.

The noble Lord, Lord Mountevans, raised shipping, as did the noble Baronesses, Lady Randerson and Lady Ritchie. On 24 April, the Government announced a financial package to keep freight flowing on routes into and across the four nations of the United Kingdom. I am conscious of the importance of food flowing into Northern Ireland—the noble Lord, Lord Empey, raised this. Although routes are currently running without significant disruption, the package is designed to help avoid future disruption or delays. In the interest of time, I will, in my letter, write in full on the situation of Northern Ireland, because I think it is absolutely critical. We wish and intend to have no difficulties in our trading arrangements across the United Kingdom. Indeed, we want to have very good trading relationships with the EU and across the world as well. As my noble friend Lord Arbuthnot—I think—and the noble Lord, Lord Empey, and others raised, there are undoubtedly going to be lessons from this crisis and for the longer term as well.

We have included in the Agriculture Bill a new requirement for the United Kingdom Government to report on food security to Parliament at least once every five years. The report will analyse a wide range of data and will contain information on food supply, including the role of strong domestic production alongside diverse sources of supply. It will cover a range of issues, including global food availability, supply sources for food, the resilience of the supply chain, household expenditure on food, food safety and consumer confidence. The five-year frequency was set because we need to allow sufficient time to observe key trends, but I emphasise that these matters are under constant consideration.

Our engagement with businesses and representative bodies in the food sector has been extensive; I have seen that for myself. Food businesses have responded swiftly and responsibly to ensure the supply of food and have worked with us to make sure that those most in need have continued access to food.

Throughout, we have wanted to highlight the crucial role the food and farming sectors have played, now more than ever. While we remain confident in our supply chain, we must not be complacent and will continue to work with industry to ensure that there is food—and great British food—on our shelves and in our kitchens.

I thank the noble Baroness and all noble Lords, particularly those I have not been in a position to mention. I am very conscious of all that has been said and am taking back all the comments made. I will write fully and am very grateful for this debate. As I said at the beginning, it has been extremely thought-provoking—not only about the current crisis but most definitely for the longer term.

3.36 pm

**Baroness Boycott:** My Lords, thank you so very much for such a wonderful, varied and interesting series of contributions. I learned such a lot from them all and will read everybody's contributions carefully, because I was incapable of taking enough notes and listening at the same time. I particularly thank the Minister for his continued work in this area. I know that his commitment to all the subjects we have talked about today is real, valid and strong.

As we have seen today, food touches every area of our lives, as well as every corner of our wonderful planet. As the noble Lord, Lord Cameron, said, we need to “eat the view”. It might be fanciful to say, but I have always believed that if we could get the food system right, we would live in a happier, healthier, fairer and very much more environmentally just world.

Food is not a commodity, like a T-shirt or cardboard box. It is a magical substance that enables us all, and all our fellow creatures, to live and thrive. Everything in our world begins and happens because of the way we convert sunlight. We do not actually do it; plants do it for us. They feed us to become capable of things. If you think about it, everything begins that way. It cannot really be replicated. But in these dark times, it is really important to remember that if you plant a green bean into the soil and give it some water, it will reward you in a few weeks with an enormous amount of extraordinarily wonderful food. This is a magic that science cannot recreate—and one we should treasure and learn to pass on to our children.

What food is not is a series of images that many of us see. It is not one of the saddest ones I know—workers in China wearing specially adapted vests so that they can pollinate fruit trees, because they have managed to kill all the bees due to the overuse of pesticides. Food is not pathetic chickens living in factories where they are allocated less than the size of an A4 piece of paper to live in. I read yesterday in the *New York Times* that because of the crisis in America and the fact that the chickens are getting a bit bigger because of problems in the supply line, they are suffocating them with foam because they cannot think how else to get rid of them. Food is not an orangutan dying thousands of miles away from me in order that I can get a cheap chocolate mousse in my local supermarket, because that orangutan's habitat has been cut down to produce palm oil. Food is definitely not the aisles and aisles of cheap snacks in our supermarkets that, when you look at the ingredients, contain no living product at all.

I have now worked in this world for about 12 years. I think that my aim is quite simple, but it is extraordinarily hard to achieve. I believe we all have the right to have access to healthy and affordable food, regardless of where we live, how much money we have, whether we are old, ill or vulnerable, and whether we are a child or a senior in the last days of our life. It should be a right, in much the same way as we think that education and healthcare are rights. Quite frankly, we now see that if we do not make decent, healthy food a right for all of us, we will end up burdening all those systems. I know, as many of your Lordships probably do, that when children are not fed over the summer holidays, they cannot start off again well at school. This is so important,

yet as a Government and as a country—on all sides of the political chain—we have been very happy since the war, when we last had a food strategy, to leave it to private companies to dictate the way we eat. If you are a private company in a capitalist economy, at the end of the day you want to sell more product made from cheaper ingredients, and that is where we are today.

However, there is hope on the horizon. We have the Agriculture Bill, which was debated yesterday in the Commons and, I gather, will be coming to this House after Whitsun. We have a food strategy in Defra. It is slightly on the back-burner now but it will come back. There is now much discussion in the world about the best use of land and about restorative agriculture. It would be a great tragedy if, after all this—if after seeing what Covid-19 has revealed—we returned to business as usual. As my noble and good friend Lord Krebs said, food is the one thing that we cannot do without, but certainly it is the one thing that we can really try to get right in the future.

I hope that, like me, everybody has got a great deal from today's session. I hugely look forward to having lots of conversations with people—something that I cannot do face to face at the moment but can do online. I hope that, in the days to come, what we have learned from this debate will inform and take the process forward.

*Motion agreed.*

**The Deputy Speaker (Lord Haskel) (Lab):** My Lords, the Virtual Proceedings will now adjourn until a convenient point after 4.30 pm for the Question for Short Debate in the name of the noble Lord, Lord Bird.

3.42 pm

*Virtual Proceeding suspended.*

## **Housing for the Homeless**

### *Question for Short Debate*

4.30 pm

*Asked by Lord Bird*

To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to support people who were previously homeless into permanent housing after the COVID-19 pandemic.

*The Question was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

**The Deputy Speaker (Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall) (Lab):** My Lords, the Virtual Proceeding on the Question for Short Debate in the name of the noble Lord, Lord Bird, will now commence. This debate is time-limited to one hour. I therefore remind noble Lords that the time limit for Back-Bench speakers is one minute.

**Lord Bird (CB):** Good afternoon. I am grateful for this opportunity to raise a very pressing issue that bothers us all. Anybody who has been involved in homelessness or anyone who walks the streets of our cities will have seen over a considerable period thousands of people there who are completely beyond the legal remit. They are not a part of the social compact that we have as citizens and as voters. They are outside society and have remained outside of it for many decades, certainly since the early 1960s.

When I was a rough sleeper and a beggar in those times, if you so much as sat down in public and went to sleep or if you were begging, you would be pursued by the police. That was the old way of doing things. Obviously, we did not want to keep using those old draconian Vagrancy Act-style methods, so instead what we did was just ignore the homeless on the streets. We left everything to charities and organisations like Crisis, Shelter and St Mungo's. They have done an incredibly rich and useful job for us all, but the time has come when we cannot allow the streets to return to what they were pre Covid-19. We cannot decant the homeless from the places that fortunately they have taken up—not all of them; some people are still out there. I meet and talk to them, and I am sure that many noble Lords have seen them on occasions when they have been out and about in city centres. There are not enough places for the homeless.

What happened when we began to respond to the Covid-19 crisis? Mr Jeremy Swain, who was working with the rough sleepers initiative and was the tsar, so to speak, and Dame Louise Casey were put in charge by the Government to lift people off the streets and put them into places of safety. They were taken away so that they could be socially isolated. I want us all to commend the hard work of Dame Louise Casey, Jeremy Swain and all those organisations which came together to do this wonderful thing. They broke away from the fact that for decade after decade we had been ignoring these people and had left them outside of democracy. We left them on the streets to die in an abuse of human rights of an untold kind.

We have brought people in and they are now as comfortable as can be, bearing in mind that it is very difficult for someone to come in from the streets where they were living a limited life and being put into a fine place like a Trusthouse Forte hotel—I cannot remember where they have all been put. Oh, I am sorry, my wife has just reminded me that they have been put into Travelodges and Holiday Inns. They would be wonderful places to be at any other time, but maybe not for people who are socially isolating when what they want to do is get out and have a cigarette, walk around the block and maybe talk to someone.

The Government have taken responsibility. This is the first Government since way back during Victorian times to have said that people living on the streets are their responsibility. They have lifted them up and put them into places of safety where they are living as well as can be expected.

Fortunately, Covid-19 will end and we now need a plan. What will we do? Will we decant these people back on to the streets? Will we pretend that things are as they were, or have we seen the promised land, in the sense of government responsibility and our own responsibility, and will we say, "No, let us not put them back on the streets, let us put them in a place of safety. Let us put them in therapeutic communities where they can deal with all the demons that have led them to end up on the street—all the social problems, all the cocktail of social failure, all the damage they have done to themselves and has been done to them when they were younger, all this"? These people have come out of local authority care, out of the prisons or

out of our Armed Forces; through problems with mental health, they have dropped down and need our help. We cannot decant these people back on to the streets.

I am very pleased to say that Dame Louise Casey, who I have known for many years and have had many fish and chip suppers with—she is a lovely lady—and Jeremy Swain, who I know as well, and he is a lovely geezer, have come up with an idea. The task force has said it will find a way to provide for people once the Covid curfew is over. I want the Government to say, “We will not allow this situation to happen again. We will have to find a way to respond to it.”

Bear in mind also that there will be enormous pressure on budgets and on the streets because, post Covid-19, there will be people who will have problems, who have been left high and dry, who have been left beached by the crisis. There will be people with mental health problems, and people who have run away from blasted, broken relationships. Lockdown will have left them very vulnerable if they are in abusive relationships—we have seen enormous increases in women suffering domestic violence. What do we do about them? What do we do about the people who have been left high and dry without the means of sustaining themselves, because their business or their job has disappeared, or the place where they live has disappeared? We will have a bit of a rocky ride when we get to the end of this, and now is the time to begin the process of thinking this through.

I know it is a historical exaggeration to make a comparison with 1941, when Winston and Clem dug Beveridge out of retirement and had him work on a plan. Obviously, he published his findings in 1943 and they laid the basis of the welfare state, but we need a plan now. We need to do the work. What are the Government prepared to do? Will they talk to people like us, who have been going on resolutely for decades? Do not leave people out on the streets, because it is a human rights abuse. Because it is a human rights abuse, why are we ever entertaining people dying earlier, falling into mental ill-health and all these problems? Now is the time: we need to know what the plans are. The Government need to pull together a Beveridge-type response to the social crisis which will overwhelm them if they do not respond to it. Homelessness is obviously only the tip of the social iceberg—there are all sorts of other things—but we have to be strong here, and not in any way talk about returning to the old days.

The *Big Issue* has been removed from the streets. I was fortunate that when I talked to Jeremy Swain we worked out that we had to stop the *Big Issue* on the first day of lockdown and remove sellers because of their health and the problems that they might pass on to people who buy it. Unfortunately, that means that the *Big Issue* disappeared from the streets. We are putting it together and if anybody has a bundle of money and wants to help us, throw it our way. We would love it, especially from Her Majesty's Government.

However, the point is that we are going to be there, trying to help people to get back. We will have to go back to the idea of a hand up, not a hand out. At the moment, we are helping people and supporting our vendors, but we are stuck. We are not expecting them to work because they cannot.

This is a great opportunity to break the morass that for almost the whole of my working life has enabled us to see homeless people on the street left outside society—no longer citizens, no longer performing persons. The social contract that we have with the Government, the state, our local authorities and all that did not extend to them. Let us extend it. We must put our arms around the homeless. Let us not decant them back on the street, because that would be a mockery of our democracy and of what we have been through when we have seen so many people pull together for the benefit for us all. Let us have one for all, and all for one.

4.41 pm

**Lord Sheikh (Con):** My Lords, I have been involved in providing meals to the homeless and have had limited contact with them. According to official figures, in 2019 there were 4,266 rough sleepers in England. They are the most vulnerable group in society. Some of them have physical and mental conditions. I commend the Government, local authorities and charities for finding accommodation for 90% of rough sleepers during the pandemic. However, there must be an effective long-term plan, backed by ethical investments, to find suitable permanent accommodation for all homeless people. This should be a holistic programme that involves input from the Government, local authorities and various organisations. Will the Minister tell us to what extent this is being done? We welcome the establishment of the task force headed by Dame Louise Casey. We appreciate that the Government are committed to ending rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament.

4.42 pm

**Lord Berkeley (Lab):** My Lords, I spoke about the problem of homeless people, particularly in London, on 29 April. In his reply, the Minister, the noble Lord, Lord True, said that

“the Government believe that we have reached some 90% of those we wish to.”—[*Official Report*, 29/4/20; col. 266.]

That does not quite tally with what was in the *Guardian* today, which says that only 1,000 homeless people have been offered hotel rooms, which is better than nothing, out of 8,555 rough sleepers. I suggest that the noble Lord, Lord True, needs to change his wish or try a bit harder.

The noble Lord, Lord Bird, spoke about progress, but that is surely made best by local authorities, which are starved of cash, despite the Prime Minister saying that he will do whatever it takes. He is not doing it. Where is the money? This is a massive failure of central government. The National Health Service gets a lot, but the Government are still starving local authorities of the cash to deal with rough sleepers and longer-term needs. I hope the Minister will give us some comfort when he replies.

4.44 pm

**Lord Addington (LD):** My Lords, if we are to deal with the underlying problem of rough sleeping we must identify the individual cocktail of events that has led somebody there. We tend to think of them as a category of people. All of them will be a series of individual stories. Will the Minister say whether there is any plan to test for underlying reasons why a person

has failed to get the support systems outside? Will they particularly check for what is commonly referred to as special educational needs, such as dyspraxia, dyslexia and attention deficit disorder—anything that would mean that someone would find it difficult to handle the process of filling out forms, attending meetings on time et cetera? If we can get a handle on this and get coping strategies into this group, we may well help ourselves.

4.45 pm

**Lord Harries of Pentregarth (CB):** My Lords, I warmly welcome the Government's initiatives in this area—both the £3.2 million allocated recently to councils as a special response to the virus and the previous money made available. In their 2019 manifesto, the Government pledged to end rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament. An unlooked-for benefit of this terrible virus, and the toll it is taking on lives in causing distress, is that it gives the Government a real window of opportunity to make that pledge a reality. I very much hope that the Minister will be able to address the question put by the noble Lord, Lord Berkeley, of how many rough sleepers have still not been housed; it is very important to get an accurate figure.

However, the point is that this valuable initiative now needs to be built upon to find permanent places for rough sleepers to live. I will make two brief points on this. First, charities and faith groups are usually to be found on the front line of this work. It is essential that the cells or hubs that the Government recommend setting up include not just council departments and NHS staff, but those who are, day by day, in touch with rough sleepers and know their needs and problems. I believe I have come to the end of my minute. I end by saying that I very much welcome the Government's initiative and hope that we will see the end of this blight on our society very soon.

4.46 pm

**The Lord Bishop of Durham:** My Lords, I applaud the achievement of accommodation having been offered to 90% of rough sleepers. The community collaboration that achieved this reflects the focus of the housing commission set up by the most reverend Primate the Archbishop of Canterbury of building strong communities alongside homes. What plans do Her Majesty's Government have to create multiagency partnerships to create an integrated homelessness system?

Those who are homeless with NRPF are particularly vulnerable when discharged from temporary Covid-19 accommodation since they cannot access social tenancies. What consideration have HMG given to the pathways offered to NRPF migrants who have been temporarily accommodated? I welcome the establishment of a rough-sleeping task force. Does the Minister agree that this task force must also consider those at risk of homelessness due to the crisis? Last winter, church night shelters provided a lifeline to 2,000 rough sleepers. To avoid a peak in rough sleeping next winter, what plans do HMG have to protect those at risk of homelessness?

4.47 pm

**Baroness Blower (Lab):** My Lords, I live in London and I am therefore most familiar with the situation here. I understand that there are 4,000 rough sleepers

in hotels across London. Without government support, these people will certainly end up back on the streets. To avoid this there must be capital investment from the Government, with landlords bringing empty houses back into use, and, of course, access to affordable, good-quality private rented sector accommodation procured centrally to avoid local authorities competing for limited stock. Ultimately, a significantly funded programme of housebuilding by local authorities to provide public housing is clearly needed. Adequate housing for all is surely an ambition to which we all aspire. As a human rights issue, it is something that we simply must achieve.

4.48 pm

**Lord Young of Cookham (Con):** My Lords, we are grateful to the noble Lord, Lord Bird, not just for this short debate but for the work that he has done over the past three decades in helping rough sleepers to rebuild their lives. The pandemic offers a real chance to make a step change in policy—the “great opportunity” that he referred to and the window of opportunity referred to by the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries.

The Government's target to end rough sleeping in five years was 90% achieved in five days thanks to the heroic work of Louise Casey and her team, but rough sleepers are not a static population. As some leave the streets, other join them. It is this latter group that risks slipping below the radar if we focus solely on permanent housing for rough sleepers, a point made by the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Durham. Can my noble friend the Minister assure me that every effort will be made to help new rough sleepers off the streets before they become acclimatised to this way of life, so that the achievements of recent weeks are consolidated and made permanent?

4.49 pm

**Lord Blunkett (Lab):** I too commend the noble Lord, Lord Bird, and the initiative of the Government, which has been impressive. As a patron of the Cathedral Archer Project in Sheffield, I know that it is struggling now to raise the resources to be able to continue its work and to be able to link it to what has been described by other contributors as the holistic approach. Many rough sleepers have multiple problems and need multiagency work with them, including on alcohol and drug misuse. If we can get this right now, we could avoid what is a crisis at Christmas, which then ends up with people back on the streets.

4.50 pm

**Baroness Janke (LD):** My Lords, many young people today under 25 face homelessness because a family member is shielding or because the stresses within a vulnerable family make them unsafe. They struggle to get the support they need. High house prices and rents mean that over two-thirds of young people today are paying more than 30% of their income on housing costs. The Government can help young people move on from homelessness or avoid it altogether through equalising universal credit for young people living independently with that of the over-25s, restoring work allowance for vulnerable claimants, paying the most vulnerable a grant instead of the five-week wait for universal credit and raising the local housing allowance

for homeless young people and care leavers, as announced in the 2020 Budget. Lastly, an accessible framework of support and advice is essential if we are going to help vulnerable young people and care leavers to move on for good and escape the scourge of homelessness and rough sleeping.

4.51 pm

**Lord Truscott (Ind Lab):** My Lords, the Government could abolish homelessness at a stroke. Since 2011, the cost of HS2 has doubled to £106 billion and is rising. This obscene waste of money and white elephant should be scrapped. For the same money the Government could build 1.7 million social houses and eradicate homelessness once and for all. HS2 will employ 30,000 people, but building almost 2 million homes would employ millions of people—desperately needed employment at this time when Covid-19 will lead to a projected unemployment rate of almost 10%. I say to the Minister, “Scrap HS2, end homelessness, create much-needed jobs and save the environment.”

4.52 pm

**Baroness Crawley (Lab):** My Lords, it is right that local and national Government took speedy action to take many off the streets at the start of this Covid emergency. Rough sleepers of all people would have got the roughest end of this pandemic. I welcome the announcement of a dedicated fund of £3.2 million, on restoring local housing allowance rates, on halting possession proceedings and of course on the appointment of Dame Louise Casey. However, local authorities are still taking homelessness applications, as the noble Lord, Lord Young, said, and life after Covid could include a substantial increase in new cases. This must be the time, as the noble Lord, Lord Bird, said, for a new beginning, and I ask the Minister: what permanent housing is being planned for the thousands of rough sleepers invited in at the beginning of the emergency? Do they agree with Crisis and others that we really need to lift LHA rates permanently to cover average rents? Do the Government also agree that building far more social housing is now essential?

4.54 pm

**Lord Mann (Non-Aff):** Some local authorities have excellent systems already for dealing with homelessness and not all homeless people are the same. Putting someone with a drug or alcohol addiction into a Travelodge away from town is not necessarily a recipe for success. Therefore, will the Minister ensure that there is a proper evaluation of the successes and problems of the scheme, with an honest assessment of problems that have occurred where addiction issues have not been addressed? Who will carry out that evaluation and will it be made available to us?

**The Deputy Speaker:** I call the noble Lord, Lord Desai. The noble Lord is not responding, so I am going to call the noble Lord, Lord Balfe.

4.55 pm

**Lord Balfe (Con):** My congratulations to my good friend the noble Lord, Lord Bird, on securing this debate. I hope the Minister is enjoying his new life in replying to it. I want to concentrate on one issue. I live

in the city of Cambridge, where we have a homelessness problem and a council that does its best to cope with it. But one of the city council’s initiatives is to help the voluntary collection of money for homeless charities in the city. I suggested to it that it should do that as a statutory thing, but apparently it lacks the powers. Will the Minister look at giving local authorities the right to collect for charity, and the right to ask council tax payers to add a voluntary donation to their council tax when they pay it each month? Obviously, it needs thinking out—you cannot do it in a minute. However, it is a practical thing which, combined with government gift aid, would make a big difference.

4.56 pm

**Baroness Kennedy of Cradley (Lab):** Like many noble Lords, I hope that the new government task force led by Dame Louise Casey is a success. If it can provide rough sleepers with long-term and safe accommodation, the old adage that something good can come out of something bad would have real meaning. I agree with the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Durham that the task force should also focus on homelessness prevention, especially among private renters. I will use the time I have to ask some practical questions about the task force. When will its membership be published? I hope that it will be cross-departmental and include faith groups and third sector organisations, and those who understand the needs of rough sleepers in our cities, towns and rural communities. Will the task force receive extra funding to do its work? Will it publish its terms of reference, work plans and minutes, as many want to engage positively with its work and help contribute to its success?

4.57 pm

**Lord Crisp (CB):** My Lords, the swift action that has been taken is impressive and unprecedented. It provides an extraordinary opportunity, but it is vital that it starts early, and that from day one people are thinking about rehabilitation and providing that hand up, rather than a handout. Are assessments already being made of the multidimensional needs of the people living in this temporary accommodation and, if so, is there some summary of what those assessments look like, so that action can be properly targeted? Finally, while it is really important that we do this, it will be expensive—of course it will—but the costs will be cheaper in the long run by doing it. I well remember a remark of the noble Lord, Lord Bird, that many of the *Big Issue* sellers have had something approaching £1 million of public money spent on them in all settings. Getting this right is really very important.

**The Deputy Speaker:** My Lords, while the noble Lord, Lord Liddle, is speaking I shall hand the chair over to the noble Lord, Lord Rogan.

4.58 pm

**Lord Liddle (Lab):** My Lords, in one minute I have time for one point. It is about the very important role that local government has played and the heroic efforts that councils have made throughout the country to provide decent accommodation for local people in this

Covid emergency. I note this as a member of Cumbria County Council. What will happen when this emergency is over? Will we throw these people out on the streets again or are we going to try to make proper long-term provision? That would require adequate government funding of local government. The costs to local government of this Covid emergency are estimated at £10 billion. So far, the Government have provided £3.8 billion and are hesitating about meeting the rest of the gap. But unless this gap is met and the funding continued, how on earth will the homeless continue to be provided for?

4.59 pm

**Lord Shipley (LD):** My Lords, I will raise three issues in relation to the use of hotels. First, how will the Government support people with no recourse to public funds, who will become homeless after the pandemic if they continue not to have access to those funds? Secondly, will the Government work with those councils managing the challenges created by other councils which place vulnerable people, without support, in hotels outside their areas? Thirdly, do the Government recognise the need to fund specialist homeless services as a means of reducing problems seen with the general use of hotels?

Many people who sleep rough have complex needs and experience multiple exclusion. Thankfully, in my city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne the number of people sleeping rough has fallen dramatically since the end of March, with safe accommodation being provided. I pay tribute to all those who have helped to achieve this, but some people cannot be accommodated in the long term under existing legislation. They urgently need help to stay off the streets.

5 pm

**Lord McKenzie of Luton (Lab):** My Lords, addressing the worst forms of homelessness requires that there be sufficient settled accommodation, and it certainly requires an increase in the supply of affordable housing in the true sense of that term. Also, as in times past, the housing crisis requires a significant programme of council house building. It is clear that we have a housing crisis in this country. It is not on the scale of or as dangerous as the Covid-19 pandemic, although for some, it might be as real.

What might we take from the pandemic? It is that, when the state mobilises, it can address huge challenges. We have seen billions and billions of pounds of public money applied, quite properly, to support individuals, businesses and communities. We have seen the mobilisation of the skills of the public sector through multidisciplinary and multiagency working. We have seen productive partnerships between the public and private sectors. We have seen the intellectual power of our science space brought to bear. In due course, we must enjoin all this capability and these approaches to solve the housing crisis, which we have had for too long in this country.

5.02 pm

**Baroness Uddin (Non-Aff):** My Lords, I commend my noble friend Lord Bird for his persistent efforts to eradicate homelessness and applaud the government initiative. I too call on the Government to assure this

House that all persons recently taken out of the wilderness of homelessness and housed under emergency legislation will be provided with long-term, safe and secure housing.

Equally, there are hundreds of thousands of homeless families across the country living in sub-standard, expensive, long-term temporary housing. In light of our more enlightened social consciousness, will the Government seek to secure permanent housing solutions for these vulnerable families?

Finally, in the light of the 30% rise in domestic abuse cases, what action is being taken to ensure that women fleeing violence and abuse will not face the plight of perilous homelessness, particularly those women with no resource to public funds?

5.03 pm

**Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth (Con):** My Lords, first, I commend my good friend the noble Lord, Lord Bird, for what he has done with the *Big Issue*. He has made a positive difference. I encourage people to set up a postal subscription to it in these difficult times, to provide practical help.

I welcome my noble friend the Minister and congratulate MHCLG on the effective, swift action it has taken. Like others, I look to the task force and Dame Louise Casey—two staples of government life, and a heady mix—to come up with some constructive proposals. Like the noble Baroness, Lady Kennedy, I think that we need to know the terms of reference, when they will publish recommendations and how this will be taken forward.

The formidable challenge of our time will be managing what happens as we come out of the pandemic. How do we ensure that these people remain off the streets and have proper homes? Those are the challenges, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response on that.

5.04 pm

**Lord McNicol of West Kilbride (Lab):** My Lords, if we thought rough sleeping was bad before Covid-19, we can rest assured that it will be a lot worse when we soon enter one of the toughest economic downturns our country has seen. However, it does not need to be. Both this Government and the last Labour Government have shown that great strides can be made when you put your mind to it. This Government have shown that in their response to dealing with Covid-19, and the last Labour Government did so by delivering on the planned rough sleepers initiative.

As the noble Lord, Lord Bird, said in his intro, we need a plan for when we come out of this. May I push the Minister to go into detail on that plan? My noble friend Lady Kennedy touched on the task force's membership. When looking at the membership, I encourage the Minister to look to involve and include those representatives from local government who have a huge amount of experience in dealing with these issues.

5.05 pm

**Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb (GP):** I welcome the Minister, the noble Lord, Lord Greenhalgh, to his first debate; I am sure that we will have some superb answers from him. I also congratulate the noble Lord,

Lord Bird, on securing this debate and on all the work he has done. I have been concerned about homelessness for a long time and I have two practical suggestions from Liberty about the regulations which, at the moment, penalise the homeless beyond all sense.

First, homelessness must be defined—and defined broadly. If you do not have a clear and encompassing definition, authorities will probably rely on an inconsistent or narrow interpretation of what homelessness is, which risks criminalising the homeless.

Secondly, homeless people must be excluded from the prohibition on gatherings. There is a possibility that homeless people will be moved along, fined or criminalised in circumstances where they cannot be expected to keep apart from groups.

5.06 pm

**Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe (Lab):** My Lords, I refer to my registered interests. I raised the issue of permanent accommodation in this House on 30 April, as did others. The Minister said that the Government were focused on options for accommodation for rough sleepers going forward. Can the Minister be more concrete today? Will he, for example, refer to the recommendation from St Mungo's, one of our foremost homelessness charities?

On 6 May, I asked again about affordable social housing. The Minister said that the only way to have long-term stability and affordability was to build more homes in the right places—I agree. The Minister then referred to the Government's plans for home building. Can the Minister today confirm that this means that building more homes of all tenures, but specifically social housing, is a mainstream issue for our road to economic recovery as well as for ending rough sleeping for good? Can he confirm that specific provision will be made for it in the next review of public spending?

5.07 pm

**Lord Randall of Uxbridge (Con):** My Lords, I, too, pay tribute to the noble Lord, Lord Bird, for his inspirational work on this issue. For many homeless people, a dog is their best friend and main companion. In particular, for anyone with a mental health problem, drug or alcohol dependency, their pet is their main support and very important to the recovery process. Therefore, during the current situation in relation to Covid, while rough sleepers are being moved into hotel and emergency accommodation in order to enable them to self-isolate, it is considerably unlikely that homeless people with pets will move into alternative accommodation if it means giving up their pet. Given that people experiencing homelessness, particularly those who are rough sleeping, are thought to be more at risk of contracting the virus, and given that they are unlikely to give up their pet, it is crucial that dog-friendly emergency accommodation is made available. I commend the excellent work of the Dogs Trust and its Welcoming Dogs scheme. Dog-friendly accommodation must also be available post lockdown, so that homeless people, some of whom have moved off the street for the first time in many years and are now interacting with essential services, are not forced to choose between returning to street homelessness or giving up their beloved dog.

5.08 pm

**Baroness Greider (LD):** This is a historic opportunity led by Dame Louise Casey. Evidence is already emerging that many of those rough sleepers who have been sheltered were originally in the less scrupulous parts of the private rented sector, which means that a further increase in the LHA, lifting of the benefit cap and a permanent end to Section 21 evictions are all critical to ensuring there is no return to widespread rough sleeping. I hope that the Government will support the Generation Rent campaign #ventyourrent to give voice to those people. Can the Minister give an undertaking that no one will be forced out of their emergency accommodation without an offer of suitable housing? Will the Government increase support for housing first and to local authorities?

This pandemic is global and we therefore need to treat it as such. What will the Government do about the rough sleepers with no recourse to public funds? If ever a moment called for a good Samaritan approach, it is now.

5.09 pm

**Baroness Wilcox of Newport (Lab):** I thank the noble Lord, Lord Bird, for this debate. Both during and after this crisis, no one should be left homeless. Local authorities in all four nations must be supported by the national Government to allow them to take account of the demands of local housing needs. The absence of any credible funding strategy from the UK Government up until now has left local authorities unable properly to tackle homelessness.

This public health crisis has demonstrated that it is the state which can be relied on best to confront our greatest threats. We are a community; we are responsible for one another, and the interdependence of the public and the individual on health and homelessness is clear for all to see.

I was really pleased to hear the Prime Minister say in Parliament yesterday:

“We will be investing considerable sums to make sure that we build the housing and address the social issues to tackle that problem for good”.—[*Official Report*, Commons, 13/5/20; cols. 245-6.] When will the Prime Minister publish the details of these considerable sums to build housing, and what does he intend to do to tackle the problem for good? His response is eagerly awaited, especially by those at the sharp end of this housing and homelessness scourge so prevalent in our society.

5.11 pm

**The Minister of State, Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Lord Greenhalgh) (Con):** My Lords, I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Bird, on securing this debate and on his passionate advocacy for homeless people not only in this House but in his dedicated work over three decades, in particular as founder and editor-in-chief of the *Big Issue*. I am grateful also to noble Lords who have contributed this afternoon. I found the debate thoughtful and well informed, and I note particularly the history of rough sleepers from the period of the Vagrancy Act through to that where they were simply ignored, and to this golden opportunity to end rough sleeping for good. I thank the noble Lord for taking us on that journey.

The Covid-19 pandemic has represented a devastating threat to communities—personally, I lost my mother last month to this ghastly virus. It continues to be a threat all over the world. It is important to note that the threat has been particularly stark for certain groups, one of which is vulnerable rough sleepers, who, unable to self-isolate, cannot protect themselves or prevent wider transmission of this awful disease.

The Government were quick to recognise this and moved swiftly to bring rough sleepers in off the streets and out of the most dangerous shared sleeping environments. This work was spearheaded by Dame Louise Casey. I also commend Jeremy Swain, the government adviser on homelessness. The work involved local authorities and wider homeless agencies up and down the country working tirelessly to set up new accommodation, often using hotels, to ensure that these vulnerable people were given a space to protect themselves in.

Within just over a month, 90% of those identified as rough sleepers have been given offers of accommodation. That is 5,400 rough sleepers taken off the streets, which is a remarkable achievement. It involved a huge effort from local government and the wider homelessness sector which has ultimately saved many lives. This Government have led this work and made more than £3.2 billion in funding available to local authorities to manage the impacts of Covid, which includes their work on rough sleeping.

I want to focus on some of the points that noble Lords raised. The noble Lord, Lord Addington, is right that in order to end rough sleeping we need to look what causes these people to be roofless. My noble friend Lord Sheikh and the noble Lords, Lord Bird and Lord McNicol, pointed to the need above all for a long-term plan. Clearly, such a plan will involve local authorities and charities, and, as mentioned by the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries, faith groups will play a critical part in delivering it. That long-term plan could come only with the political will and top cover provided by a Government who are prepared to stump up the cash. In just two months, £3.2 billion of funding was given to local government, but there is money set aside in addition to end rough sleeping.

The opportunity is that that Dame Louise Casey will spearhead a task force to lead the next phase of the Government's support for rough sleepers during this pandemic. At this stage many of the things that noble Lords asked for have not been finalised—the terms of reference, the membership and the transparency process have all to be worked on—but I am sure that the points made in the debate will be taken up by Dame Louise and the task force. The overriding objective of this task force is to ensure that as many people as possible who have been brought in off the streets in this pandemic do not return to the streets and that they are retained in safe, secure and settled accommodation. The task force will work hand in hand with local and regional government and the homelessness agencies and shelters to do this and draw together expertise from across society, including businesses, faith groups, the health sector and the wider public sector, and of course communities. It will also ensure that the thousands of rough sleepers now in accommodation continue to receive the physical and mental support they need over the coming weeks. We are aware that some of the

individuals in this accommodation have not engaged with services for many years, so in this midst of this terrible pandemic there is hope that this could be an opportunity to turn their lives around for good.

As for the types of accommodation we will look to secure, rough sleepers have different types and levels of need. We will be encouraging local authorities to identify appropriate accommodation for each individual. My noble friend Lord Randall talked about dog-friendly accommodation; that was a point well taken. Many noble Lords asked about money. There will be consideration of how the additional £381 million of funding announced at the Budget for move-on accommodation for rough sleepers might support this endeavour. I also want to refer to the £750 million of funding announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to support charities providing vital services and helping vulnerable groups through the Covid-19 crisis.

The Government are aware that many voluntary and community sector organisations are facing significant pressures and loss of income at a time when they are needed most. In response, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has secured a £6 million fund to assist the homelessness and rough sleeping charity sector as it continues its vital work during the coronavirus pandemic. The purpose of the £6 million fund is to support front-line homelessness and rough sleeping charities in their efforts to help keep homeless people and rough sleepers safe and supported while responding to the challenges brought by Covid-19. Big Society Capital and Social Investment Business have also recently established a new £25 million resilience and recovery loan fund. This will enable social lenders to provide emergency loans without fees or interest for the coming 12 months. More widely, Big Society Capital has announced a £100 million emergency response.

In the words of the noble Lord, Lord Bird, this is the time for a big, bold plan. We believe that the Government, in setting up this task force and putting a considerable amount of money into support for rough sleepers, are going to seize that opportunity. But it will be a plan that requires every stakeholder, local authority, charity and faith group to make it happen. We are committed to supporting vulnerable rough sleepers, not just during the pandemic but long after it ends.

**The Deputy Speaker:** My Lords, the Virtual Proceedings will now adjourn until a convenient point after 6 pm for questions on the Commons Statement.

5.18 pm

*Virtual Proceeding suspended.*

## Arrangement of Business

### *Announcement*

6 pm

*The announcement was made in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

**The Deputy Speaker (Lord Palmer of Childs Hill) (LD):** My Lords, the Virtual Proceedings on the Statement will now commence. Please note that it has been agreed in the usual channels to dispense with the reading of the Statement itself, and we will proceed immediately to questions from the Opposition Front Bench.



## Covid-19: Transport Statement

*The following Statement was made on Tuesday 12 May in the House of Commons.*

“With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a Statement about the new transport guidance for passengers and operators that has been published by my department today.

Coronavirus has cast a shadow over the lives of everyone in this country. As we all know too well, for some it has caused unimaginable heartache. For millions more of our fellow citizens, this crisis has meant an enormous sacrifice in the national effort to beat this disease. The Government are immensely grateful to the British people for the profound changes that they have made to their lives over the last few weeks.

I also extend my thanks to transport workers and the wider freight sector for their immense efforts to keep Britain on the move during this crisis. We will always remember the way in which the industry has served the country during the most challenging of times. Public transport operators have ensured that all those front-line staff have been able to get to work and fight the virus, while freight firms have delivered vital goods and kept supermarket shelves stacked.

However, it is now time to consider how together we emerge from this crisis. On Sunday, the Prime Minister set out the first careful steps for reopening society and a road map for the weeks and months ahead. Undoubtedly, transport is going to play a central role in that recovery. It will be the key to restarting our economy and in time will enable us to renew and strengthen those precious ties that are so deeply valued by us all.

As I said last week, our nation’s emergence from this crisis will not be a single leap to freedom; it will be a gradual process. We cannot jeopardise the progress achieved over the past few weeks by our shared sacrifices. We therefore remain clear that those who can work from home should continue to do so. However, as those who cannot start to return to their jobs, the safety of the public and of transport workers must be paramount. That is why the Department for Transport has today published two new pieces of guidance for passengers and for operators.

These documents aim to give passengers the confidence to travel, and they seek to give operators the information they need to provide safer services and workplaces for passengers and for staff. We encourage operators to consider the particular needs of their customers and workers as they translate these documents into action.

The first document is aimed at passengers. I will summarise some of the main points contained in the advice. First, as I mentioned, we continue to ask people to go to work only if they cannot do their jobs from home. That is because, even as transport begins to revert to a full service, the two-metre distancing rule will leave effective capacity for only one in 10 passengers overall. It is therefore crucial that we protect our network by minimising the pressures placed on it and ensure that it is ready to serve those who most need it.

As a result, we are actively asking those who need to make journeys to their place of work or other essential trips to walk or to cycle wherever possible. In order to help us do more of that, last week I announced an unprecedented £2 billion investment to put walking and cycling right at the heart of our transport policy. The first stage is worth £250 million and will include a series of swift emergency measures, including pop-up bike lanes, wider pavements and cycling and bus-only corridors. That money should help protect our public transport network in the weeks and months ahead. It is my hope that they will eventually allow us to harness the vast health, social and environmental benefits that active forms of travel can provide. If people cannot walk but have access to a car—I appreciate that I will be the only Transport Secretary to have said this for very many years—we urge them to use the car before they consider public transport, avoiding where possible any busy times of day.

I do, however, recognise that for some people using transport is a necessity. In this case, passengers should follow the guidance we have set out today in order to keep themselves safe. It recommends that travellers must maintain social distancing by staying two metres apart wherever possible to prevent the virus. We also advise that as a precautionary measure, particularly where that is not possible, people wear face coverings when using public transport. That could help protect other travellers from coronavirus where someone has perhaps unwittingly or unknowingly developed the illness but they are not showing any symptoms. We urge passengers to avoid the rush hour and replan their visits, to use contactless payments where possible and to wash their hands before and after their journeys.

In addition, the guidance also reminds us that, at this most challenging of times, it is more vital than ever that we think about the needs of others. Our transport operators and their staff are doing an incredible job to keep everyone safe. Please follow their advice. In stations and bus interchanges, be patient and considerate with fellow passengers and staff. In particular, we should remember the needs of disabled passengers, those with hearing and sight impairments and older travellers, too.

As I mentioned, we are also publishing a second document, guidance for transport operators, today. Those organisations really are at the forefront of the national recovery effort. They know inside and out the needs of their customers and their workers, and they understand like no one else their industry’s specific needs. That is why I have no doubt that the operators are best placed to implement the safety processes that work best for their businesses, their employees and their customers. The guidance we are publishing today advises operators across all forms of private and public transport on the measures they can take to improve safety. The steps include ensuring stations, services and equipment are regularly cleaned, and that passenger flows are clearly communicated to try to avoid crowding and to keep everyone on the network—passengers and staff—two metres apart wherever possible.

The guidance will develop over time, in line with our increasing understanding of how coronavirus is spread and how it is contained. In addition, it is likely that there will be no one-size-fits-all approach to implementation. It will need to be tailored and localised,

based on plans of local specific transport needs. In preparation for that process, yesterday I wrote to local authorities to set out how we can work together to prepare transport networks at a local level for restart and ensure public safety.

The documents I publish today will help ready our transport system to support our country as we seek to control the virus and restart the economy. We will inevitably encounter obstacles along the way as we embark on the next stage of our national fightback against the virus. There is no doubt that we need to continue to work together to overcome those challenges. On that note, I would like to express my gratitude to our partners in the devolved Administrations, the local authorities, the mayors, trade unions and transport operators for their work over the past few weeks. I look forward to continued collaboration in future, because co-operation will be key to setting the country on the road to recovery.

If everyone plays their part, and if we continue to stay alert, we can control the virus and save lives. If we all follow the guidance on making essential journeys, I believe that together we can harness the power of transport to build a new and revitalised nation. I commend this Statement to the House.”

*The Statement was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

6.01 pm

**Lord Rosser (Lab):** I begin by expressing our thanks to all involved in the transport industry, and in particular all those key workers on the front line who have kept this vital sector up and running during the pandemic for the use of other key workers and for the movement of essential supplies. I do not know the exact number, but certainly over 50 transport staff have died with Covid-19, the majority in London. We express our sincere condolences to their families and friends.

The devastating consequences of Covid-19 make this Statement on government guidance all the more important, as people are now being actively encouraged to go back to work if they cannot work at home. Indeed, some people who have been able to work from home are now being told by their employer to return to the workplace. Those going back to work are being told to avoid using public transport where possible and, instead, to travel by car, by bike or on foot.

However, this guidance is not a directive and contains a lot of “shoulds” and “coulds”. I am concerned about how practical implementing the guidance will be, in particular in respect of social distancing and maintaining a two-metre distance on public transport. Transport for London has said that, given the national requirement to maintain social distancing wherever possible, capacity on the Tube and buses will be reduced to around 13% to 15%, even once services are back to full strength.

Some 80% of those coming into central London to work come in by public transport. Even if that figure is halved by people still working from home and by more people coming in by car, there will not be the required capacity on public transport if social distancing is to be maintained, as indeed we have already seen. At times, the position will be the same in our other

major cities, even though the percentage travelling to work by public transport is nowhere near the level in London.

How will social distancing be maintained? For example, a suburban train, bus or tram coming into the centre of London or another major city will start its journey from the outer terminus with a limited number of passengers. As more passengers join at each station or stop on the inward journey, the train, bus or tram will become more crowded. Under these guidelines, will the operator be expected to have staff at each station or bus stop deciding how many passengers can still be allowed to get on each arriving train, bus or tram, consistent with maintaining social distancing, and preventing passengers joining if maximum capacity still enabling social distancing to be maintained has already been reached? Will the operator, under these guidelines, be expected to stop passengers entering at each station if the platforms already have the maximum number of people on them waiting for a train, consistent with maintaining social distancing?

Are these examples of what is meant by maintaining social distancing wherever possible under these guidelines? If not, how will social distancing be maintained in reality if it is entirely a matter for each passenger whether or not they choose to get on a train, bus or tram that already has more people on board than is consistent with maintaining social distancing? What can the Government tell us today about the extent to which it has been possible to maintain social distancing this week on our trains, buses and trams as they have got nearer on their inward journeys to the centre of London and our other major cities?

For public transport staff, the train or station, bus, coach, ship, plane or taxi is their place of work rather than a means of getting to work. I am not clear how much guaranteed protection these guidelines provide them with. There is no provision for PPE to be provided for front-line staff. The Statement also says that wearing face coverings when using public transport could help protect other travellers, and presumably also staff, from coronavirus—but having said that, the guidance then only advises people to wear face coverings.

If a bus driver, for example, feels that more people have been regularly getting on their vehicle than is consistent with maintaining social distancing, and that their employer has not done as much as could have been done to prevent that situation arising, which they feel puts their health at risk, is it clear in the Government's view whether the driver has the right to decline to continue working, without penalty, until the situation is resolved, whether by the employer or the intervention of an outside body?

I turn to the Government's 14-day quarantine proposals, which cover apparently everyone coming from anywhere in the world unless via France or from Ireland. Will the Government publish the advice that says we need 14-day quarantine now but there has been no case for it previously? Why is France excluded and why, just as one example, does Gibraltar find itself included when it has had no deaths from coronavirus? How will the 14-day quarantine period be enforced? More than 18 million passengers have entered the UK since January. Will it be against the law for an individual

not to be present at the address they have given? Who will ensure that they are, and which organisation or body has the resources to do this in the current situation?

I have real doubts about the practicality of applying some of these guidelines, in particular in relation to social distancing on public transport, and I suspect that many in the Government do too, unless the vast majority of people returning to work simply choose not to travel to work in this way, and particularly in London. Time will tell, but we can only hope that the guidelines do their job and we do not end up with a second spike in coronavirus cases which could affect anyone, including those of us taking part in this debate today.

**Baroness Randerson (LD):** I echo the thanks to all those key workers in transport industries who have kept vital supplies and vital workers moving during the last two months. As always, our economy sits on the shoulders of the transport sector. Like the noble Lord, Lord Rosser, I want especially to mention bus drivers and others who died, who were particularly exposed to the virus in their work.

I start by reminding everyone that last Sunday's broadcast by the Prime Minister was essentially for England only. New rules and advice were announced, but they were for England. The situation is different in Wales and Scotland, so it is now a complex picture. That matters, of course, because transport crosses borders.

I very much welcome the investment announced in cycling and walking, specifically the emergency and temporary measures. While I am delighted to see the speed of response, I seek assurances from the Minister that this first tranche of money will be followed by long-term investment in improving the infrastructure for active travel. Indeed, the Department for Transport itself has estimated that it needs £5 billion to nearly double the number of trips using cycling from 2% to 4%. This announcement was of course for £2 billion. Can the Minister give us some detail on how the Government will work with local authorities to ensure that the money is indeed spent well and quickly?

I was also pleased to see the announcement about trials of electric scooters on public roads. Can the Minister tell me a little more about this? Will it involve only scooters for hire or include privately owned scooters?

For me, the peace and quiet in recent weeks, due to the lack of transport noise, has been wonderful. So too has been the improvement in air quality. The reduction in harmful emissions has allowed us to glimpse a view of how to tackle climate change. However, on Sunday, the Prime Minister fired the starting gun on the return to old habits when he advised people to get back in their cars and avoid public transport. I accept that there is an impossible conundrum with public transport. It is not possible to socially distance on most buses and trains; it is therefore essential that every other possible safety measure is taken seriously.

I was disappointed that the guidance issued by the Department for Transport to public transport operators was essentially a series of suggestions. There are many bus operators across the country, many of them small operators with limited capacity. Early in this crisis, the Government recognised the need to take centralised control of train services. I am not suggesting for a

moment that they should nationalise bus services, but I am surprised that they have apparently not established a national forum for sharing good practice and providing guidance to bus operators. Will the Minister consider that?

On issues such as screens, frequent cleaning, going cash free and the availability of hand sanitiser, the guidance was very laissez-faire. It was merely a series of suggestions, which I fear can—and in some cases, will—be ignored. As the noble Lord, Lord Rosser, pointed out, the advice to passengers on face masks states:

“There are some circumstances when wearing a face covering may be marginally beneficial”.

It goes on to emphasise that it is “optional” and “not required by law”. The lesson of the past few weeks is that although we, the public, like to know why we are being told to do something, we also like clear instructions. That instruction on face covering would have been much clearer if it had simply said, “You are advised to cover your face in crowded places.”

I look forward to the Minister's response.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Transport (Baroness Vere of Norbiton) (Con):** My Lords, I join the noble Lord, Lord Rosser, and the noble Baroness, Lady Randerson, in paying tribute to everybody in the transport sector who has worked so tirelessly over the recent weeks and months to make sure that those who must travel are able to do so. They have done a superb job in keeping things going. It is a great tribute to their hard work that we are in the position we are in today. I also offer my sincere condolences to the families and friends of all those, particularly in the transport sector, who have lost their lives.

The noble Lord, Lord Rosser, made a number of points. He started by not being wholly supportive of the transport operator guidance, in that it was not directive and is not practical. This is not the feedback that I have had from the transport operators—and I speak to them a lot. They are perfectly capable of taking this guidance and translating and transposing it into the appropriate measures that they need to take according to the needs of their workers and passengers. It is not the case that a bus operator is the same as a tram operator or a PHV operator. There is a huge variety of transport operators, which is why the guidance is set out as it is. I have not had feedback that transport operators feel that they are missing direction. Certainly, I have had feedback that they are working incredibly well together in developing guidance, then adjusting it for their own needs and for their own staff.

I will accept that, in certain circumstances, social distancing on public transport will be a challenge, and that is recognised in the guidance. For example, the passenger guidance refers to 2-metre social distancing “where possible”, and states that this is probably sometimes not possible—at busier times, on busier routes and at certain points in the journey. That guidance goes on to talk about other mitigations that can be put in place to help the passenger—for example, avoiding physical contact with other passengers and not standing or sitting face to face. Spending minimal time with other passengers, such as passing in the corridor, is not thought to be too much of a risk. The guidance says that face coverings are advised in enclosed spaces, which is

what the noble Baroness, Lady Randerson, wanted it to say. We have set out exactly what should happen and what passengers' expectations of social distancing should be.

The noble Lord, Lord Rosser, talked about operationalising social distancing and explained many of the things that operators are considering. Each operator is preparing its own plan for its particular transport type and circumstances, operationalising social distancing, and other elements within the guidance, and putting it in the plan. The Department for Transport is reviewing many of those plans, to make sure that we too are content that the right measures are put in place.

Crowd management will be one of the important things. The noble Lord, Lord Rosser, asked what would happen if a certain number of people got on a platform. This has, of course, been thought through. Every Transport for London station has an operational plan to make sure that certain things will happen and that passengers are managed and advised in the right way so that we do not get too much bunching. The noble Lord, Lord Rosser, asked whether we had been able to maintain social distance this week. I am delighted to report that there have been very few problems, and I think that all those that did occur were reported on the news. When I spoke to Transport for London last night, the picture it was able to give me of its operations was pretty positive. It had not seen persistent levels of lack of social distancing. For the time being—fingers crossed—everything is going to plan.

The noble Baroness, Lady Randerson, mentioned the devolved nature of the country. The consequence of devolution is that it is up to other countries to have their own guidance, should they wish to do so. However, the transport operators are doing a very good job at communicating that to passengers. Our guidance for people travelling between the devolved nations is: just check with the transport operator. There will be posters everywhere; it will be impossible to miss them.

Cycling and walking also featured in the noble Baroness's remarks. I am delighted about the £250 million that is coming out of the traps in order that we can get local authorities to make changes quickly. She asked whether we were involved with the local authorities in that. Yes, we are. We have published road space allocation guidance which helps them to understand the sort of things they need to consider when introducing, for example, wider pavements for pedestrians or temporary cycle lanes to encourage more people to get on their bikes.

I cannot offer further details on e-scooters at the moment, as I believe they are still being finalised. If the noble Baroness could be a tiny bit patient, I think an announcement will come very shortly. This is a good opportunity for us to trial this new form of transport, to see if it works for cities and other places in our country.

Finally, the noble Baroness mentioned the bus operators and whether there should be a national forum. I speak to the bus operators very regularly. They fall into two associations: the CPT and ALBUM, which covers the smaller players. Those two associations are doing great work in encouraging the bus operators to share best

practice and to help them develop risk assessments for their particular circumstances. I do not think there is a need for a national forum because that is all happening.

**The Deputy Speaker (Lord Palmer of Childs Hill) (LD):** We now come to the 30 minutes allocated for Back-Bench questions. I would ask that both questions and answers are kept brief so that I can call the maximum number of speakers. In each case, the Minister will answer.

6.20 pm

**Lord Balfe (Con):** My Lords, I begin by declaring an interest in that my son owns a small chain of bicycle shops. I want to talk about Cambridge, where I live, and the problems that this directive will have there. If you work in London you cannot cycle or walk from Cambridge, but nevertheless it is a commuter town. It takes 50 minutes to travel to London by train, two hours by car, and if you do go by car, where on earth can you park? The problem will revolve around trains.

What thought has been given to the fact that if trains can take only 10% to 15% of their current load, and bearing in mind that during the rush hour trains from Cambridge are standing room only, how will the number of people on trains be controlled? Will there be rationing? How can it be done, because there will not be enough trains to take even a quarter of the people to work? Following the example of France and Belgium, I would particularly like to press the Minister to ask for the wearing of masks to be obligatory on public transport. Those countries have done it. Also, can the social distance be reduced from two metres to one metre?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** I thank my noble friend for his thoughts on this issue. He has clearly described the challenge that we face in matching demand with the supply of public transport, in this case the trains. Obviously, the Government are encouraging everyone who can work from home to do so, and certainly from the conversations I have had so far regarding London a large number of companies are still encouraging their people to work from home. The second thing we are asking companies in London, and indeed beyond, to do is to spread the load a bit and flatten the peak as much as they can. We are asking companies to put in place staggered start times to ensure that not everyone arrives on the nine o'clock train. Rail services are gradually being increased, but we want to ensure that the safety of their front-line staff remains absolutely critical. The operational plans for services and for the infrastructure around rail travel are being put in place, and the chairman of Network Rail, Sir Peter Hendy, has been tasked by the Secretary of State for Transport to review all those operational plans to make sure that rail services are as good as we can get them, given the capacity constraints.

**Lord Campbell-Savours (Lab):** My Lords, my question is about masks, a subject I raised some 10 weeks ago in the Moses Room. Could not officials learn a lesson from the much-reported bus incident in Shenzhen in Hunan province in China, where nine passengers were infected by a single carrier? The virus was transmitted

a distance far in excess of the two metres that we are following. It travelled up to four metres from the single original infected source. More significantly, those passengers who were wearing masks were not infected, so why not make the wearing of them mandatory on public transport, as has just been suggested? That is the case in Thailand, which has one of the lowest death rates from the virus in the world, as well as in nearly 50 other countries worldwide? Are they all wrong?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** The noble Lord has indeed raised this point before. I looked at that study. It is interesting, but obviously I am not a scientific expert. Therefore, I cannot comment on it in detail. We have asked our group of experts to look at what we should do about face coverings. They have said that we should advise people to wear face coverings in enclosed spaces and where they are likely to bump up against the two metres. There will have to be a change in culture among people travelling on our public transport. The Government will certainly support that change in culture through a very extensive communications campaign. As the amount of people on public transport builds up, we expect more people to wear face coverings because it is the right thing to do to protect others.

**Lord Bradshaw (LD):** Anybody with any experience of public transport knows that one of the best things that can be done is to stagger working hours. The early spring is the best time of the year to do it since it is light for so long. What is being done about public bodies and public employers, which should be being directed by the Government to spread working hours? Will the Minister consider doing the same thing for private employers?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** The noble Lord is right that staggering working hours is one of the ways that we can reduce demand on public transport. I have a call tomorrow with the main employer groups in London to discuss exactly how they are liaising with their membership on staggering working hours. We are also in touch with all the large urban centres, such as Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds, to get their large employers to do so. Talking about public sector employees, I believe the number of people going into the office at the Department for Transport at the moment is about five.

**Baroness Grey-Thompson (CB):** The Rail Delivery Group has stated that disabled passengers who need assistance during their journey can still book ahead, but they may be asked extra questions to help staff plan how to help them safely. What will those additional questions be? How will those with invisible impairments be supported? By their very nature, it will not be possible to identify that such people have additional needs.

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** This is an incredibly important topic. The Rail Delivery Group—the organisation made up of the train operating companies—is finalising staff guidance, which includes suggested example questions around where a customer may have a preference in the nature of the assistance provided. It has not been finalised. There will be public communications on this in due course, so the RDG

will be able to provide further information. The rail industry is currently undertaking a comprehensive review of the passenger journey to understand better the needs of those passengers who have invisible impairments because, as the noble Baroness quite rightly says, sometimes those passengers have other needs.

**Lord Lea of Crondall (Non-Aff):** My Lords, what strikes me about this is that the virus is the subject of a huge amount of numerical modelling and forecasting. I am amazed at the lack of numerical modelling in passenger transport of intermodal splits on different scenarios. In the medium term—in the autumn or something like that—we will need to sustain public confidence with more information, options and explanations of the dilemmas in the trade-offs of social distancing, in this case, with the rate of growth or decline of GDP et cetera. It is very important to have a higher level of public engagement and understanding.

Initially, will the Government institute more transparency on where the pinch points will be later in the year—information on which I am sure exists in the files of the Department for Transport—so that we can have an adult conversation, as called for by one of the Minister's colleagues the other day? The modal split in town, country, big cities and so on will be different for rail, bus, car et cetera, but we need to make sure that we do not run into gridlock in some centres by digging up the road to put in a wider pavement, such as Piccadilly Circus et cetera being dug up at the same time as Oxford Circus. Is that not a danger? I do not know which forum might be useful, but I know that there are a lot of very well-informed and interested parties. Would this be something to look into so that we can have some numerical forecasts to scrutinise, with no skin off the Government's nose? Public engagement will heighten public understanding.

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** The noble Lord raises interesting issues to do with data and modelling. I reassure him that the Department for Transport has a vast amount of data and does a huge amount of modelling. However, the sort of thing that he is talking about—a very centralised, top-down approach to solving our local transport needs—is not what we are proposing at the moment. In fact, we think the right way to go is to talk to the metropolitan mayors and local authority groups and get them to refresh their local transport plans, because they are the ones who know what is going to happen in their local communities. They can really put into practice what will need to be done to support the future forecasts for the different splits on the different modes of transport.

I agree with the noble Lord that there is much to be done—much data and much modelling—and that there are things we can crack on with, but this is best done locally. The Department for Transport is very happy to help. We review these plans and have asked these groups to refresh their local plans in light of the changed circumstances.

**Baroness Pidding (Con):** My Lords, while we are encouraging the public to avoid using public transport where possible, there is likely to be an increase in the

take-up of bicycle hire in cities. Is consideration being given to providing hand-sanitising facilities at all bicycle docking stations?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** I thank my noble friend for raising this, as it is something I think we have forgotten. It goes back to the oldest of chestnuts on this issue. When talking about coronavirus, we were told from the beginning to wash our hands and not touch our faces. That advice is still completely true and should be followed. The Government's new guidance reiterates this and tries to remind people about hand hygiene. We recommend that people wash and sanitise their hands regularly, both before and after journeys, whether on an e-bike or any other form of transport. Operators, including those which look after bicycle docking stations, should ensure that measures are in place to protect their users. We encourage the operators to implement the guidance in the way that best fits their working practices.

**Lord Dubs (Lab):** My Lords, first, I understand that the Transport Secretary was quoted as having said that it is a civic duty to avoid public transport. Could the Minister confirm that that is the Government's policy?

Secondly, going back to the question of face masks, even if they are only 50% effective, most of us would be much happier to have a 50% chance of not catching something than to be more liable to catching it. The Government's argument on face masks is weak and unconvincing. Those of us who might be forced to take taxis would be much relieved if the taxis themselves were sanitised between passenger journeys. I do not want to get into a taxi that has been occupied by somebody going to hospital because they think they have been infected.

Lastly, what do we do at St Pancras when a passenger from Belgium arrives on a Eurostar train? How do we separate that passenger from somebody who has come from Paris?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** On the first issue the noble Lord raised, on public transport, let us be absolutely clear what we are talking about here. Those who cannot work from home and have to travel to work, or those who are making an essential journey, who cannot travel on a bike, by foot or in a car should use public transport. If you can possibly avoid using public transport—as a transport Minister, I cannot believe I am having to say this—you should. Therefore, if you are tempted to use public transport but could actually get on your bike, I suppose it is your civic duty to get on your bike. What we are saying about those who should use public transport and those who should not is absolutely clear.

The noble Lord also talked about getting into a taxi or private hire vehicle, which the transport operators' guidance also covers. It includes a section on cleaning and hygiene and making sure that your place of work, namely your taxi, is clean and protects subsequent passengers. Therefore, that is what taxi and PHV drivers should be doing.

Finally, on borders—I am aware that I did not answer the noble Lord, Lord Rosser on this issue—we will be doing three main things. International arrivals

will have to supply contact and accommodation information, and there will be lots of advice on arrival to support that. They will be advised to download the contact-tracing app and told to self-isolate for 14 days. Noble Lords probably have several other questions on the borders issue but the details have yet to be fully finalised. We do not know exactly how the scheme will work or what the exemptions will be, so I will have to beg noble Lords patience on this one. No doubt we will come back to it in due course.

**Lord Taylor of Goss Moor (LD):** Long before Covid hit this country, literally millions of families had booked holidays abroad for this summer, which is now fast-approaching. The Secretary of State and other Ministers have made it clear that they do not believe people should be travelling abroad; the new border requirements will effectively make such a holiday impossible for most people anyway. However, there is no clear statement from the FCO or the Government requiring people not to go abroad, so in many cases they are not able to get their money back. They cannot claim on insurance as it is not a required cancellation; the airlines are flying the flights, so they cannot get their flight money back; and tour companies are in many cases, at best, offering a change of date and refusing refunds.

All that could be sorted out by a clear statement from the Government. In many cases, with earnings down and some unable to earn at all, these families now desperately need that money. The Government cannot expect people to be happy about this; they are being told that they cannot have their holidays, but the Government are not taking the action that would allow them their money back.

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** The reality at this time is that the Foreign Office is advising against travel overseas, but it does not have a crystal ball. Therefore, it would be impossible to say that up to a certain date in the future—quite far into the future, given that we are only in May—there will be no travel at all. We simply cannot say that.

I too am in this boat. I have a holiday booked. Will I go on it or not? I do not know. This is just one of the things about coronavirus that we have to deal with. I am really hoping that I can still go but, if the Foreign Office advice by then is still, "You must not travel", there will be ways that people can get their money back. We must not get over-excited about this at this moment. As time progresses, guidance about overseas travel may change. We just have to be alert and try to be patient. I know that it is incredibly difficult. For some people, their holidays may happen; for others they may not, and we can then look at how they get their money back.

**Lord Low of Dalston (CB):** My Lords, disabled people are fortunate to enjoy a great deal of assistance from the staff of transport undertakings, which is very much appreciated. Will the Government give guidance on how this can be maintained compatibly with advice on social distancing?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** The noble Lord raises a very important point. The published guidance specifically refers to making sure that public transport remains accessible. It refers to those with protected characteristics,

including, of course, disabled passengers. On specific translation of the guidance on social distancing requirements for disabled passengers, I too am interested to see how that has developed, but I have not looked into it in great detail. So, I will write to the noble Lord to give him examples of how transport operators are putting this guidance into practice.

**Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb (GP):** Something that makes our roads much less safe and will deter people from walking and cycling is extreme speeding, which has been happening increasingly during lockdown. The police in London have enforced more than 5,000 instances of speeding, and some of those speeds—in areas with 20 or 30 mph limits—are incredible. This will deter people. Will the Minister undertake to speak to the traffic police and find out if there is anything the Government can do to ensure stronger enforcement of this offence?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** The noble Baroness is right, in that there have been some really unpleasant examples of people speeding—sometimes vastly over the speed limit—and it is entirely and utterly unacceptable. However, I am pleased that the police have been continuing to do their speeding enforcement; a number of those people have been caught and have received some pretty severe fines and other penalties. Making cyclists feel safe is extremely important, and this money—the £250 million—is a very good start in ensuring that there are dedicated lanes for cyclists, such that they can be protected from cars. Even cars travelling at normal speeds can sometimes feel very fast to a cyclist. Having that enforcement is really important, as is towns and cities thinking more about the needs of the cyclist alongside those of the car driver.

**Lord Blencathra (Con):** Will my noble friend the Minister acknowledge that London is not the UK? Will she ensure that plans to open up rail travel are based on the needs of the whole country, and look not just at London's Tube and the cities? If we opt for a 14-day quarantine for everyone coming into this country then it must apply to every country, including France and Ireland. And will our Lords authorities please use the mute button for any Peer who rabbits on with a two-minute supplementary?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** It is not within my remit to answer that last question. However, my noble friend is right that London is not the UK. That is why Sir Peter Hendy has been working with the TOCs to open up rail services across the country. We are of course opening up all transport services across the country; that is incredibly important. On the point that he raises about 14-day quarantine and who that will apply to, as I have said previously, the scheme is still being finalised. The final details have not yet been announced, including whether there will be any exemptions.

**Lord Adonis (Lab):** The noble Lord, Lord Bradshaw, raised a crucial point about staggering the start and end of working times so that the peak is reduced, which makes it possible for more people to travel safely on the Tube. The Minister's reply greatly concerned me, however, because she said that she was going to

phone the London employer organisations tomorrow. Why is she doing it, rather than Transport for London and the mayor's staff? This clearly needs military-style organisation, big employer by big employer, with spreadsheets and all the rest of it. With the best will in the world, I do not imagine that the Minister and her officials are undertaking that military-style campaign, but it is obviously appropriate for Transport for London and the mayor to do so. Will she clarify who is responsible for undertaking this work with the major employers in London?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** I speak to TfL every few days and our call tomorrow will be done together, because we felt that that would be the most appropriate way to get the message across. As I think my noble friend Lord Blencathra said, London sometimes likes to think of itself differently. Adding in national government indicates that this effort has to happen across the entire country, which is why I am talking with the metro mayors as well. I am doing it with TfL, not to TfL, and there are certainly some very capable individuals within TfL who have excellent relationships with the employers. All I am doing is adding my help, but it is with the agreement of TfL.

**Lord Fox (LD):** In her answers, the Minister has gone through a range of guidance and advice. It has been made clear today that the police have no legal powers to enforce social distancing. Can she tell your Lordships what legal powers transport operators have to enforce social distancing and crowd management in their stations, rolling stock and vehicles?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** The noble Lord is quite right. This is guidance; it is not a legally binding set of requirements and it is not designed to be. If we are to make our fight against Covid a success, to my mind it has to be a partnership between four groups: national government; local authorities, which know their communities; the transport operators that run the transport; and the passengers. If one of those four groups does not step up and fulfil their role, we will fail. That is why communication will be so important as we go forward with the fight against Covid.

**The Earl of Clancarty (CB):** I welcome the recommendation that passengers wear face masks on public transport. If face masks are not to be mandatory, at least not yet, what will be done—an example might be adverts on the Tube—to strongly encourage this practice as a public duty in protecting fellow travellers and bus and railway staff, not just on the transport itself but on station concourses?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** Communication will be key when it comes to face coverings. It will be about getting across the message of “I will protect you and you will protect me”, through both people wearing face coverings. I take the noble Earl back 20 or 30 years, to the days of drink-driving. People do not drink and drive nowadays; they used to. Why? Because it is unacceptable. The damage that you might do to other people is the key issue. With the consent of passengers, we need to make sure that they do it because it is the right thing to do.

**Lord Foulkes of Cumnock (Lab Co-op):** My Lords, on cross-border trains to Glasgow and to Edinburgh, which guidance should operators and passengers adhere to, that of the UK Government or that of the Scottish Government?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** I think that I covered this in my remarks to the noble Baroness, Lady Randerson. A transport operator in Scotland should look at the Scottish Government's guidance, and a transport operator in England should look at the guidance from the Department for Transport. That is the nature of devolution. I have not had any complaints about confused passengers or confused transport operators yet. We work closely with the devolved nations to make sure that each is aware of where things are going with regard to transport.

**Baroness Falkner of Margravine (Non-Aff):** The Minister has mentioned that further guidance on e-scooters will be coming out, but she is aware of how silent they are and of their ability to move at some speed. Will they have some kind of registration or licensing which is clearly visible? They are extremely dangerous. Anyone walking around central London today will know that there are a lot of them out there, even though they are illegal. Will there be some recognisable licence on the basis of which people can be reported to the police when they break the rules?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** There are a large number of issues around e-scooters. A call for evidence is out at the moment which does not close until July. We will run the trials, the details of which will be announced soon, at the same time as responses to the call for evidence come in. From the perspective of the Department for Transport, it is important that we engage with all the right people on this. The noble Baroness makes some important points. We have to get it right: we have to make sure that e-scooters are limited to the right speed; we have to make sure that people feel safe in using them but also safe in being around them, and that they do not turn into a menace for pedestrians or wheelchair users using the pavement. There are all sorts of issues to be sorted out, but having the trial is a useful first step. Let us dip a toe in the water and see how we like e-scooters.

**Lord Goddard of Stockport (LD):** ONS data figures on excess deaths released on Monday show an elevated death rate for bus and coach drivers, almost twice that for administration occupations. Is it not time to introduce systematic workplace testing for people in higher-risk groups?

**Baroness Vere of Norbiton:** Workplace testing already exists. Anybody within the transport system who needs a test because they have symptoms of coronavirus can get one. Either they can sign up themselves or their employer can do it for them. That means that the individual concerned can find out whether they have coronavirus and, if not, and if they feel well, they can get back to work.

**The Deputy Speaker:** Lord Liddle. No? The noble Lord's microphone has not been unmuted and he has missed his chance.

The time allotted for the Statement is now up. I am delighted to say that we virtually got everybody in to speak.

6.50 pm

*Virtual Proceeding suspended.*

## Covid-19: Schools Statement

*The following Answer to an Urgent Question was given today in the House of Commons.*

"It is over seven weeks since we asked schools, colleges and childcare settings to close to all but vulnerable children and those of critical workers. This has been a huge ask of teachers and parents, but the greatest impact of all has fallen on children themselves. I am immensely grateful for the response of all those working in education, childcare and children's social care, but we all know that the best place for children to be educated and to learn is in school, and it has always been my intention to get more of them back there as soon as the scientific advice allowed.

As the Prime Minister has confirmed, we are now past the peak of the virus, and he has set out a road map for the next phases of our recovery. If progress continues to be made, we expect that, from 1 June at the earliest, we will be able to begin a phased return to school, college and childcare for children in key transition years, alongside our priority groups. Primary schools will be asked to welcome back reception, year 1 and year 6 children in smaller class sizes. Nurseries and other early years providers, including childminders, will be able to begin welcoming back children of all ages. Secondary schools and colleges will be asked to provide face-to-face support for years 10 and 12, who are due to take key exams in the next year.

On Monday, my department published initial guidance for settings on how to begin to prepare, and we will work with the sector leaders to develop this further in the coming weeks. This guidance sets out protective measures to minimise the risk of infection, including restricting class sizes and limiting mixing between groups. Crucially, all children and staff will have access to testing if they develop symptoms of coronavirus. This will enable a track-and-trace approach to be taken to any confirmed cases.

We continue to follow the best medical and scientific advice, and we believe that this phased return is the most sensible course of action to take. I know that it will be challenging, but I know that nursery, school and college staff will do everything in their power to start welcoming our children back to continue their education."

7.16 pm

*The Answer was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

**The Deputy Speaker (The Earl of Kinnoull) (Non-Aff):** We will proceed immediately to questions led by the Opposition Front Bench. The Minister will respond to each question in turn. I ask that questions and answers be brief, so that I can call the maximum number of speakers.



**Lord Watson of Invergowrie (Lab):** My Lords, we all want schools to reopen and children's education to resume, but the primary consideration before that can happen has to be the safety of pupils, their families and all staff. Yesterday, in the Commons Science and Technology Committee, the Department for Education's own chief scientific adviser revealed that he had not made an assessment of plans to begin reopening English schools from 1 June and had not been asked to. So much for the Government's mantra about following the science. Does the Minister now accept that instead of asking schools to implement a hasty and unrealistic return by a specific date, they should be asked to meet certain conditions that, when completed, would signal that it was safe to reopen—a subtle but important change of focus?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Education and Department for International Trade (Baroness Berridge) (Con):** My Lords, it has always been made clear that the decision to reopen schools on 1 June is contingent on five tests being satisfied, including a decrease in transmission of the disease, and that once schools reopen there is a hierarchy of controls for them to put in place to lower the rate of transmission of the disease. It has been made clear by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State in the other place yesterday that the opening date on 1 June is anticipated on the basis of the scientific evidence, but matters are under constant review.

**Lord Storey (LD):** As has been said—the Minister will agree—we all want schools to reopen as soon as possible. Disadvantaged children, particularly those with special educational needs, are finding their learning getting further and further behind. But can the Minister understand how parents feel? Young children cannot be put in a bubble or socially isolate. They touch each other and play. It takes just one child or adult to pass on the infection and you have another care-home situation ripping right through our school system. Does she agree with the director of children's services in Liverpool, who has said that no schools will open in Liverpool until the most rigorous risk assessment of the safety of children in those schools has been carried out? What is her view on that? Finally, will she publish the scientific evidence that shows it is safe to open schools?

**Baroness Berridge:** My Lords, the Secretary of State made clear in the House of Commons yesterday that scientific evidence will be published, and the minutes of SAGE up until about mid-April are currently available and will be updated. Of course, schools will do risk assessments on pupil safety, but the noble Lord is correct that early years and primary school children cannot be expected to socially distance in the way that adults and older children can. Public Health England's advice is that the five steps of the hierarchy of control—such as regular cleaning of tables, regular hand-washing and children being in distinct groups of up to 15 with the same teacher and kept separate from other groups in the school—can limit and lower the rate of transmission.

**Lord Baker of Dorking (Con):** The Government are completely right to invite students at years 10 and 12 to attend school on 1 June this year, because they

will be taking GCSE and A levels next summer, but they have lost a whole term's teaching and disadvantaged students will never be able to catch up on that time. Will the Minister ensure that Ofqual and the examining boards reduce the content of those exams next year to ensure fairness for all students, particularly disadvantaged students?

**Baroness Berridge:** My Lords, disadvantaged students, particularly those in year group 10 that the noble Lord mentioned, are specifically targeted for the computers that the Government have spent more than £100 million on, so that they will be able to catch up on their studies. Obviously, we have asked schools to have some contact with them before the summer holidays.

**Baroness Coussins (CB):** My Lords, will the Minister tell the House whether the arrangements for reopening schools will apply equally to supplementary schools, especially those that are registered as community language examination centres?

**Baroness Berridge:** My Lords, the guidance surrounding the return of schools relates to early years schools and colleges. The colleges the noble Baroness mentioned are out-of-school settings, and as many of those are community places—places of worship, et cetera—they are currently not expected to reopen on 1 June, on the basis that in such settings the rate of transmission can often not be lowered in the way it can with the hierarchies of control that can be applied in schools.

**The Lord Bishop of Durham:** I am grateful to the Minister and the Secretary of State for meeting me and the Church of England education team earlier in the week. The longer that children are learning from home, the wider the disadvantage gap that may well be developing. Does the Minister agree that the risks of not reopening schools in a managed and phased way are actually greater than the logistical challenges presented by reopening?

**Baroness Berridge:** I am grateful to the right reverend Prelate for his assertion. We in the department are particularly aware of the risks for disadvantaged students and the attainment gap the longer that schools remain closed. I have to say that the teachers and the heads of trusts that I have spoken to are keen to reopen schools because they are particularly concerned about the learning loss for disadvantaged students and the challenges they face to re-engage them in school.

**Lord Hayward (Con):** My Lords, ONS data published a few hours ago shows that the level of infection among two to 19 year-olds is equivalent to that of other parts of the population. Will this information influence the decision to reopen schools on or about 1 June?

**Baroness Berridge:** I can assure noble Lords that all scientific information is being considered by SAGE. In particular, there is a sub-group in relation to children and its advice has obviously been essential in informing the decision. Of course, it is anticipated that the scientific evidence will allow us to reopen schools on 1 June in that phased manner, but it has been clear that if the scientific advice moves, or if the rate of transmission is

not decreasing, that position could change. However, a reopening on 1 June is anticipated, and schools should plan for that.

**Baroness Taylor of Bolton (Lab):** Does the Minister agree that the priority going forward must be those children, especially in deprived areas, who have received little or no education, whether at school or at home, over the last few weeks? Will she look in particular at ensuring the best possible experience for such children when they are leaving primary and transferring to secondary school in September? To this end, will the Government arrange, fund and consult on the provision of additional summer schools and extra classes to aid this transition, because those children who do not settle well into secondary school will lose out completely on their life chances?

**Baroness Berridge:** The noble Baroness is correct and that is why the transition year of year 6 is one of the priority years to bring children back into school. Of course, we are also looking at the moment to expand the 880 breakfast clubs that we have around the country, and £70 million is being spent on free school meals at the moment. She is right that we need to look at all options to help these children catch up on education. I am grateful for her suggestion and welcome suggestions from any other noble Lords. There will be many parents and teachers awake at night, worried about these disadvantaged children, and I can assure her that Ministers too are concerned about those children.

**Lord Burnett (LD):** My Lords, I should declare that I have the honour to be chairman of the Plymouth diocese Catholic Academy Schools Trust. Our 36 schools, as well as most other schools in the country, have been

open throughout the crisis for vulnerable children and the children of key workers. All teachers and all staff of schools throughout the country have been hard at work, both with their pupils at school and, in addition, by preparing, delivering and supporting home learning, organising and—often themselves—delivering free school meals, and doing many other tasks. I hope that the Minister will join me in congratulating and sending our profound thanks to all teachers and school staff throughout the country.

As has been said, we want all children back at our schools when it is safe. Parents, staff and governors are concerned. Internationally, eminent medical practitioners, scientists and educationalists have counselled caution. Can the Minister confirm that each school will receive for circulation to parents and staff as soon as possible sourced, independent, expert medical, scientific and educational opinions and advice on the safest and most effective way of building from our current position to the point where all our pupils are safely back at all our schools?

**Baroness Berridge:** Noble Lords will be aware that the scientific evidence we rely on comes from the SAGE committee. Obviously, I join the noble Lord in paying tribute to the hard work of so many parents, teachers and support staff who have not only delivered school meals but printed out worksheets and delivered work to people's doors. We will move toward the reopening of all schools but this is contingent on scientific advice, which is the best way forward.

**The Deputy Speaker:** My Lords, I very much regret that the time allotted is now up. The day's Virtual Proceedings are now complete.

*Virtual Proceeding adjourned at 7.27 pm.*



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