

Petitions Committee

Oral evidence: e-petition session: The easing of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, HC 623

Wednesday 15 July 2020

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Committee Members present: Catherine McKinnell (Chair); Tonia Antoniazzi; Chris Evans; Nick Fletcher; Katherine Fletcher.

Other Members present: Daisy Cooper; Lyn Brown; Huw Merriman; Neale Hanvey; Kate Griffiths; Lilian Greenwood; Tim Farron; Vicky Foxcroft; Marion Fellows; Ian Byrne; Ruth Jones; Wera Hobhouse; Dr Philippa Whitford; Helen Hayes; Chloe Smith, Minister of State, Cabinet Office

Questions 1-20



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q1 Chair: Thank you all for joining us today. I am delighted to be chairing our first hybrid e-petition session, which we have scheduled to give Members across the House an opportunity to discuss the issues raised by the e-petitions relating to the easing of covid-19 restrictions.

Sessions like this would normally take place in Westminster Hall, but due to the ongoing suspension of sittings there we have been looking at alternative ways to consider the issues raised by petitions and present these to Government. Although we would still very much like the resumption of our regular debates in Westminster Hall, I am really pleased to be holding today's session in the way that we are. It means that Members, in particular, who are shielding or self-isolating and are therefore unable to take part in some of the proceedings in the main Chamber are able to participate today.

I am also really pleased that the SNP and official Opposition have fielded Front-Bench speakers and that we have a Minister attending the session, listening to the debate, who will respond to the issues that Members raise. To give as much time as possible for Members to contribute, I will call Chris Evans to open the debate.

Chris Evans: As this is our first Petitions Committee debate for many months I would like to say something about the Committee staff. With the suspension of sittings in Westminster Hall it has been particularly difficult for staff to respond to the ever-increasing number of petitions the Committee has received. They have done a fantastic job, and on behalf of the whole Committee I would like to thank them.

We have recently gone through an unprecedented period in our history. It is little wonder so many people have been moved to add their names to petitions that relate to life after lockdown. I shall begin by highlighting the most prominent of these petitions, which was due to be debated before lockdown. The petition is entitled "Allow gyms and leisure centres to reopen" and the wording is as follows: "The goal is to get the government to rethink their decision to close gyms and leisure centres and to come to an agreement to reopen them."

The enforced isolation that came about from lockdown will have had an undoubted effect on people's mental wellbeing. Research has shown that public gyms and leisure facilities have a positive impact on educational attainment, productivity, reducing crime and loneliness and engaging inactive and disadvantaged communities. Recently the trade body ukactive, and Community Leisure UK, warned that more than 58,000 jobs were at risk, hitting the most deprived areas of the UK hardest, because of the devastating impact of the covid-19 pandemic.

The petition has been signed by almost 130,000 people and reached the 100,000 signature threshold on 24 June. It received a response from the Government on 13 May after it hit 10,000 signatures.

As we know, the petition, along with many others that will be discussed today, is now out of date for England, as the Government have since



HOUSE OF COMMONS

announced an easing of restrictions around gyms, leisure centres and other sporting facilities. Outdoor gyms can reopen from 4 July if social distancing measures are still complied with. Outdoor swimming pools reopened at the weekend, with grassroots sports such as cricket returning also. The Government also announced that indoor gyms, swimming pools and other indoor sports facilities will be able to reopen to the public with social distancing and increased health and safety measures in place from Saturday 25 July. However, it should be noted, again, that this applies to England only. In Northern Ireland indoor gyms have already reopened. Meanwhile in Wales it has been confirmed that outdoor gyms can open from 20 July, but the reopening of indoor gyms, pools and leisure centres has not yet been confirmed, as is also the case in Scotland. I can see that several Members representing seats in Wales and Scotland plan to speak today so I will leave the argument to them. The First Minister of Wales has said the Welsh Government will continue to discuss a path to reopen indoor sport and exercise facilities with leaders in the sector. Scotland has already moved into phase three of its lockdown route. However, the First Minister has said that indoor gyms will not be opening any time before the end of the month.

The petitioner is correct to highlight that access to gyms and sports facilities is important for mental and physical wellbeing. I am sure we can all empathise with those who found lockdown difficult. For many, going to the gym and participating either in team or close contact sport was a key part of their life prior to lockdown.

The Government have issued a list of special measures in order to allow people to return to gyms, swimming pools and leisure centres safely, once they are able to reopen. These measures include limiting group numbers, spacing out equipment to ensure social distancing is maintained, one-way systems in and out of facilities, and increased cleaning procedures and regulations. It is vital that precautions continue to be taken.

After months of lockdown, with life gradually returning to something like normality, it is easy to slip into a belief that we have seen the back of this virus. Sadly, that is far from the reality. If an easing of lockdown restrictions sees the infection rate across the UK rise again, then future lockdowns will have to be considered. Therefore, it will be necessary for business and facilities owners, and members of the public, to continue to comply with sanitation and social distancing measures, and other precautions, such as the wearing of face masks.

The number of signatures this petition amassed in such a short space of time demonstrates the desire to return to normal, as well as continuing to do so in a safe and cautious way. Since the outbreak began, the Committee has seen over 650 petitions relating to coronavirus. The Committee has also launched an inquiry into the Government's response to coronavirus, which has resulted in two reports: one is about the impact of covid-19 on maternity and paternity leave, and the other is about the impact on university students.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

There are several petitions relevant to today's debate that, although they have not reached the 100,000-signature threshold to be considered for debate, have reached the number to be eligible for a Government response. These include: "Permit weddings of 5 people...during COVID 19", "Reopen salons during lockdown with measures in place to practice safe services" and "Allow Salons and Tattoo parlours to open at the same time as hairdressers." Some of these are still awaiting a Government response, despite restrictions now being eased on salons and hairdressers, and small weddings now being able to take place across the UK.

We have also seen petitions relating to covid-19 restrictions on travel, with a petition entitled "Do not enforce a compulsory quarantine on people arriving in the UK" taking over 12,000 signatures. The UK was one of the last countries to enforce control at the border in relation to the coronavirus outbreak and implemented a 14-day quarantine for all travellers into the UK, apart from those in the common travel area, on 8 June. However, things have changed since then, with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office announcing a list of countries exempt from advice against all non-essential travel. This allows those returning from countries that no longer pose a high risk for British travellers to be exempt from self-isolating upon entering the UK. That does not mean that travellers from the UK are exempt from restrictions on entering those countries, which I know has been a source of confusion for those hoping to plan holidays and trips abroad.

A common feature of my inbox at the beginning of the pandemic was concerns from those who had travelled back to the UK at the lack of health screening and social distancing measures on planes and at British airports. Many more felt that the quarantine imposed last year was too little, too late, and should have been implemented at the beginning of the lockdown, as only a month on from implementation a series of measures had already been rescinded.

Not all petitions have called for the easing of lockdown restrictions. The petition entitled "Delay the reopening of schools to September" goes to show that members of the public are concerned that the Government may be easing restrictions too soon for some sectors. The petition has received over 41,000 signatures and the Government have responded to say that there are no plans to delay the opening of schools to more children and have said all children should be back at school after the summer holidays. It is right that we get our children back to school, but the Government must do more to assure parents that children will be safe and produce a clear-cut plan to demonstrate that schools can operate safely amid the pandemic, with precautionary measures in place.

The coronavirus situation has been fast moving and the sheer number of petitions we have been receiving would indicate that members of the public have found aspects of the lockdown rules confusing and challenging. So many across different sectors have been seeking clarity on when their businesses and facilities can reopen, and have resorted to petitions in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

order to get an answer from the Government. The pace at which the string of announcements on the easing of lockdown has been made has meant that many petitions are outdated before the Government have responded and before the Committee can debate them.

The devolved nature of decision making for lockdown measures has over-complicated the confusion for members of the public and businesses as to what is allowed and what is not. What the public need from the Government is consistency in response. The daily press briefings held by the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers started out with the intention of providing clear messages for the public. However, lack of public trust in the Government to uphold their own lockdown measures, the muting of journalists who asked questions that the Government did not know how to answer, and disputes over what was scientifically the correct course of action and what was more politically expedient saw the entire thing descend quickly into a farce. The Prime Minister's apparent lack of communication with the devolved Governments of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland has also led to confusion about the correct guidance regarding lockdown restrictions.

Lockdown cannot go on forever; we must get back to some semblance of normality sooner rather than later. Therefore, I support the easing of restrictions in order to get our economy moving again so that members of the public can enjoy aspects of life that they had to put on hold during the height of the pandemic. However, it is absolutely vital that health and safety measures continue to be strictly complied with. The cost in human life in this country of the virus has been devastating for so many families. The Government need to restore trust in their messaging, and work with leaders in Scotland and Wales to provide a more uniform approach for the whole country as we go forward.

I will conclude by thanking all those who set up these petitions and all those who signed them. One of the great privileges of living in a democracy is that petitioning works. The Petitions Committee has proven that petitions are an effective way for the public to have their voices heard by Parliament and the Government on the issues they care about. They have allowed for the entire range of voices from across the political spectrum to be heard and counted during this pandemic. For that, we should, as a Parliament, be grateful. Thank you.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you, Chris. I call Katherine Fletcher.

Katherine Fletcher: Thank you, Chair. It is a pleasure to follow Mr Chris Evans—I believe that in this environment I can say that, as well as “the hon. Member for Islwyn”. He has given us an impressive, comprehensive overview of the passions that have been aroused in the petitioners, and I want to add my voice to his in saying what a wonderful job that both the Committee and the individual petitioners have done in representing the views of many thousands of people. It is truly a wonderful example of how this House can work to represent the British people in the mother of all Parliaments, and I look forward to this innovation continuing.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The group of petitions that we are debating today says many things about the British public. I think it says how proud they are of the businesses that they have set up and the ones that they work in. It also says how proud the British are of the businesses that gain their custom, not just as places for transactions but as an important part of their lives and their communities.

The British public think that gyms and leisure centres are important, not just for physical activity but for personal wellbeing, because they have huge impacts on mental health. Even those of us who are shaped like me understand how much better you feel after a run, an exercise class or a cycle. The fact that 129,000 signatures were gathered so quickly is testament to how important and valued gyms and leisure centres are.

The British public have also said how the heartbeat of some of our high streets are the salons that make us feel better when we are down. They provide an enormous source of chat, comfort and community, and occasionally a bit of gossip. Which woman—or, for that matter, which man—does not feel better after a bit of prettification and a good natter? Certainly not me. These women-led businesses are something that I am incredibly proud to get to, although perhaps not as often as I should.

I also want to thank all of South Ribble's petitioners who have supported the beauty industry in Lancashire. I have had much casework about individual businesses. I will not name all of them, but I will give an example, one in Tarleton: The Secret Spa. People were desperate to get back, and I hope that I speak for many in the debate today when I say that I look forward to its appointment book being full or even overwhelmed as people come back.

I do not want to forget the tattoo parlours, those skilled artists who are the subject of another petition, such as InKarma in Penwortham. They help us to commemorate those we have lost, they help us to show the love that we have for our families and they allow us to shape how we present ourselves to the world.

This is important stuff. What came across in these petitions is that the people who run these businesses, the people who work in them and the businesses themselves are valued by tens of thousands of people. I want to put on the record my support for these important sectors and my delight that the lockdown restrictions have eased. As these petitions show, there was a huge appetite for them to reopen as soon as it was safe to do so and I am super glad that it has happened. It is important in this debate that we recognise why we asked them to close in the first place. This Government did not take those measures lightly. It goes against all our political instincts, but we had to act to save potentially hundreds of thousands of lives, and I must say that I would support that measure again, if it became necessary. I really hope it is not, and I have every confidence that is not, but it is not something that was done on a whim, and it is always important to remember that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The scientific advice has guided our actions and they have understood how the virus spreads—bearing in mind that we did not even know what this thing was in January—how spreadable it is and what stops it spreading. There are a lot of very clever and committed people working on vaccines to stop petitioners getting it and working on medicines to help them if they do get it. They are a big part of what has allowed these petitions to be heard in England, and I look forward to their being heard in Wales and Scotland as well, to allow these businesses to reopen.

Those scientists and data modellers, the people behind the scenes, have worked such long hours to understand how we can come out of the necessary lockdown with the risks minimised. They have worked so hard, so how can we as a nation strike that crucial balance between preventing an awful disease and not irreparably damaging the businesses that pay our wages, make our lives brighter and contribute taxes to the Treasury that pay for our wonderful NHS, our schools and all of our important public services?

I want to add my voice to those of the petitioners on weddings. We all look forward to being able to attend a wedding; I know I have a number of people who are desperate to get married in a do that is bigger than 30 people, and I hope they understand that we do not take the restrictions lightly. Similarly, while I am yet to be the proud owner of a tattoo—I will not necessarily put it on record, but I might drop a couple of hints—I call on the Government and our scientists who are working with them to listen to these petitioners and get these businesses opened as soon as it is safe to do so. I would like to say thanks to everybody, and say to anybody watching this, please do enjoy your local gym, your local salon and your local leisure centre, and look forward to enjoying your family wedding and your local tattoo parlour.

Q3 Chair: Thank you. I now go to Tonia Antoniazzi.

Tonia Antoniazzi [V]: It is an honour to be able to take part in this e-petition debate on the easing of covid-19 lockdown restrictions, and a big thanks from me to all the staff for facilitating it.

As the veil of covid lifts, there is a looming national tragedy on the horizon. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer, and I have to speak out on the current situation with regard to cancer treatment delays across the UK. The situation has the hallmarks of a national crisis and it cannot be ignored any longer.

During a meeting with representatives from all the cancer APPGs in Parliament during the lockdown, we all agreed that there was a need for a national cancer recovery plan and wrote to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on 22 May. Unfortunately, we are yet to receive a reply to that letter. I would hope that the Secretary of State would sit up and listen to the chairs of the APPGs on blood cancer, radiotherapy, stem cell transplantation and children, teenagers and young adults with cancer. We cannot and we will not be cast aside.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

A number of our fantastic cancer frontline workforce have obviously been redeployed to assist in the pandemic response. We hugely value their support and endeavours during this very difficult time, but we are concerned that the cancer workforce was already depleted pre-pandemic and will find it very difficult to return to even normal duties. As many people are picking themselves up from the initial shock of covid, there is this tragedy. Experts are warning that as many as 35,000 people could die unnecessarily of cancer as a result of delays and disruptions to their treatment.

Some hon. Members may have seen last week's BBC "Panorama" programme on Britain's cancer crisis, which laid bare the current situation. The investigation exposed a crisis to the public and, quite rightly, people are concerned and angry. Kelly Smith's story featured in the programme. She tragically passed away aged 31 during the making of the programme due to her bowel cancer, which has been devastating for her family. Her life expectancy was drastically cut short after her chemotherapy stopped as a direct result of covid-19.

The response to Kelly's story has been staggering. The Catch Up With Cancer change.org petition, which has not yet become a parliamentary one but I hope will, from her parents Craig and Mandy Russell in collaboration with Radiotherapy4Life, has received more than 100,000 signatures within hours of it being opened on Saturday morning and huge media attention. When I checked this morning, it was at just over 165,000 signatures.

People need to take the time to look at the petition and read the comments on the petition page. It hit home with me how many people are affected by the backlog of cancer services. This morning, I read, "I'm signing this petition as my cancer surgery was postponed because of Covid 19," and, "Cancer doesn't go away just because of COVID". This one really struck me: "Cancer does not negotiate—and its treatment is non negotiable. Cancer deaths are every bit as tragic as Covid deaths and deserve an equal amount of effort to prevent them."

We understand the demands that the NHS are under in all corners of the United Kingdom. I am proud of Dr Ryan Lewis and his team at Singleton Hospital radiotherapy unit, Swansea, who recognise and have fast-tracked their research so that more patients are treated quicker and more efficiently. We need a comprehensive plan to bring cancer services, from treatment to diagnosis, back up to normal levels now.

We also have to deal with the cancer backlog or the NHS will not be able to cope with the demand, so we need smart solutions and we need a plan. We can achieve it by boosting the capacity of previously underfunded Cinderella services such as radiotherapy. The APPG on radiotherapy have a six-point plan for rapidly transforming the sector—"rapidly" being the word, because time and tide wait for no man. The Catch Up With Cancer campaign are deeply concerned that NHS England are limiting their

ambition to getting cancer services back to normal by the end of the year. That is far too long.

I end with my request to the Minister. The Government needs to make a herculean effort, and it needs to make it now; otherwise this is a tragedy waiting to happen. Will the Minister be so kind as to urgently speak to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and ask if he will agree to meet Craig and Mandy Russell, the parents of 31-year-old Kelly Smith, whose life was cut short by covid disruption to her cancer treatment, and who set up the petition? I hope to hear back from the Minister soon.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you. I will now go to Nick Fletcher.

Nick Fletcher: I thank the hon. Member for Gower. Cancer affects everybody and it is an important subject that needs to be dealt with.

This sitting will be important for lots of colleagues on both sides of the House. Like every MP up and down the country, I have addressed the concerns of hundreds of business owners during the coronavirus pandemic. I pay tribute to them all for being patient during this uncertain time.

I thank the small towns that make up my constituency in Don Valley, from Thorne to Conisbrough and all the ones in between, for showing what community spirit looks like. I thank them all for that. I also thank them for their compliance with the lockdown, which has enabled us to start the relaxation and getting back to the norm.

The Government's many schemes, including the SEISS and the furlough scheme, have been outstanding. I know that the businesses and employees who have benefited from them will be eternally grateful. As we have started to relax lockdown, the businesses that have been allowed to open are taking advantage of the flexi furlough, which is helping considerably.

As the risks are assessed, however, and the R rate is being followed closely, it follows that some businesses may be able to open but not at full capacity or without offering all their usual services. Hotels and wedding venues fall into that category. Companies that host weddings, and those in the hospitality sector, have been particularly hard hit and have had to cease lots of operations to keep the public safe.

In particular, I pay tribute to the Crown Hotel and the Mount Pleasant in my constituency, which have had to postpone or cancel many weddings at a considerable financial cost. I know from speaking to the owners of such businesses and others that the sector is suffering greatly. As such, I welcome the fact that weddings can now go ahead, although not perhaps in the way that was originally planned. A reception of up to six people will not be how most people would have wanted to spend their special day, yet it is important that we make small, cautious steps in this area, rather than risk a second wave. Most wedding venues are large, and many have



outdoor areas, which would make social distancing possible. Having spoken to stakeholders in the industry, I am confident that the risks are low and that the venue owners will be responsible when hosting such events.

Furthermore, I firmly believe that marriage enables us to build strong social foundations, which will be more important than ever as we enter this new normal. Many young people in particular have suffered great emotional distress during the pandemic due to loneliness, so I am glad that couples across the country will now be able to go ahead with a small wedding. After all, as a married man myself, I know the joy that a wedding can bring and the happiness of years of a long marriage.

It is not just the venue owners who will be relieved that changes to the guidance are being made and that some small affairs can go ahead. Many businesses, including dress shops, bakeries, beauticians, catering companies and many more will be eager for further changes, as they can run successfully only once the large receptions go ahead. Such businesses have my full support, and I know they have the support of the Government. That said, we must all remain vigilant if we are to make the most of this new normal.

However, businesses need clarity from the Government in this area. I ask the Minister whether she will provide the industry with a road map so that it can better understand when larger receptions can be held. I am sure that would provide much-needed reassurance to stakeholders in the sector. Finally, I thank all the petitioners and everyone who has helped to set up this sitting.

Q5 **Chair:** I call Daisy Cooper.

Daisy Cooper: Thank you, Chair. I am grateful to the Petitions Committee for organising and securing this important debate on the easing of lockdown restrictions. There are lots of businesses that are still not open and are very keen to get back to work, and the ones that have got back to work are pleased about that, but the Federation of Small Businesses has made it clear that lots of businesses are incredibly nervous about what will happen in the event of a local lockdown.

There are many businesses that need the public to come out and support them, but many people don't want to do that because they do not have public trust. There are things that people can go out and do safely if they adhere to social distancing guidelines and wear masks. They can support our local businesses, but we need to drive up public trust. I believe that a lot of the anxiety has been caused by the top-down, centralised approach that the Government has adopted, which has been plagued by disaster after disaster.

The NHSX app was heralded as world-beating, then downplayed as a cherry on top, and then dismissed as not a priority at all. The testing figures are all over the place. New data published quietly just last week



HOUSE OF COMMONS

showed that the Government had overstated the number of people who have been tested. Human contact tracers have been recruited without any proper training. I am told by public health experts that it requires a lot of skill to do that job properly. When someone says that they can't remember where they were or who they saw, you have to gently and persistently guide them through every single step to get the data you need for public health purposes.

There has been uncertainty over the lack of sick pay provision, and some people have been left without any income at all. Even the most recent announcement on the mandatory use of face masks, which I welcome, still has no detail about how those who are exempt for disability or health reasons will be protected from stigmatisation or worse.

Up and down the country, including in Leicester, there are reports that local authorities are not getting the data they need. In St Albans and Hertfordshire, we are receiving daily test information, but it is not postcoded, so it is of very limited value. We need daily postcoded data, day in, day out, without fail.

According to the Office for National Statistics, Hertfordshire has one of the highest care home death tolls from coronavirus. The ONS data reinforces what was reported on 2 May in the *Health Service Journal*, which highlighted that Hertfordshire and west Essex had the highest excess deaths in care homes from all causes in the week ending 17 April.

I am very concerned, as are my colleagues in Hertfordshire, that the policy choices by this Government may well have contributed to deaths through the discharge of covid-positive patients to care home settings, which could not cope with essential infection control. County council staff have also confirmed that, due to the lack of testing, they cannot be certain that asymptomatic patients were not admitted to care homes without proper isolation measures.

As restrictions are being lifted, we all want to do what we can to support all businesses to survive and thrive, but that will require public trust. That means that we need the Government to know how many tests have actually been conducted. We need an update from the Government on the number of human contact tracers, and we need knowledge about how much training they have received. We need a strategy from the Government on facemasks and a commitment to a public awareness campaign in order to protect those who are exempted for disability or health reasons from stigmatisation or worse. Crucially, we need this postcoded data, day in, day out, without fail. That is what we need from the Government in order to drive up public trust, which in turn will help our businesses to survive and thrive.

Q6 Chair: Thank you. We now go to Lyn Brown.

Ms Brown [V]: First, can I thank you, Chair, for giving those of us who are shielding priority in this debate? I cannot tell you how difficult it has



HOUSE OF COMMONS

been to have been excluded from debates and to have not been able to represent my constituents properly.

The easing of lockdown restrictions is so welcome in many ways. Most of us can see loved ones again, and some will be able to take much-needed holidays. At the same time, however, coronavirus is bereaving hundreds of families a week. In normal times, this would be absolutely horrifying.

On 23 March, when lockdown began, there were 74 covid deaths. Just five days ago, on 11 June, there were 148 deaths. On 7 June, there were 155; on 8 June, 126. The outbreak is not over and a second wave is likely coming. Surely we cannot be comfortable to live with this—to simply accept these deaths. Understandably, many people in my constituency remain frightened. Frankly, the economy and society will not recover until the threat of the virus is eliminated.

When lockdown began, the actions of the Government inspired confidence in many people, but sadly that has been damaged by confusing advice, U-turns and inconsistent enforcement. Truly, the Cummings affair severely dented the Government's credibility. But I do not want to focus on the problems of the past. I want to focus now on what we need for the future.

Newham Council and our voluntary sector—a special shout out to the Magpie Project and West Ham's food bank—have all done so much essential work to protect people, but the level of investment currently committed by the Government will not be enough. We have the second-highest child poverty rate in the country, but the money that the Government said they will give us will not do anything to match our need.

As we know, children have had massively different experiences over the past months, depending on the income of their parents. Many have been left without reliable broadband access or even the right devices, and have thereby been excluded from the education system. Their learning and development has suffered. Shocking numbers are already going hungry. If and when we lockdown again, resources have to be there in every community and home, to ensure free and fair access to education. We have to learn from past mistakes. We have to care for our vulnerable and not forget anyone as we move into what I think might be a very dangerous next phase.

Let me quickly talk about asylum seekers. The accommodation that they have been placed in has sometimes meant eight families all using one bathroom and one kitchen. How can they isolate? The money that they get to buy food for their children is on cards, which they cannot use online. What do they do if they get sick? They have to go out to buy what they need, risking infecting others. Frankly, if we do not know this by now, that if everyone in our society is not safe, none of us is safe, what have we learned over the past months?

What about those who are shielding? They are now being forced out of their homes for economic reasons, required to look for work that does not



exist simply to access universal credit. They are unable to stay safe without getting into deeper and deeper debt. Such questions and issues will be creating covid risk for months, so they have to be sorted now.

In the short time I have left, let me plead with the Government to listen to a group of medical experts preparing for the second wave. Experts on thrombosis have had approval denied for studies of potentially severe risk for covid patients and survivors. Unbelievably, approval was denied because the project did not yet have full funding, but how can full funding be secured in advance for emergency trials such as that? To get that rejection, scientists have waited for months. They have received no proper explanation of who is making the decisions or why. This cannot go on. We need actions and answers in place soon, to protect us all from the second wave.

Q7 **Chair:** Thank you. I call Huw Merriman.

Huw Merriman: Thank you, Chair, to you and your Committee, for arranging this sitting. There are far too few opportunities to debate in this place, and it is great that you have brought this alive—thanks to the petitioners for doing likewise.

It is slightly disconcerting being on this side of the Committee Room, facing you, Chair. I now know what it feels like for our witnesses. To have my predecessor up on the horseshoe makes it even more nerve-racking for me, but I will do my best.

I am particularly keen to talk about the easing of the lockdown, because in recent times I have become concerned about the impact of lockdown not only from an indirect health perspective, but because of the hit to livelihoods and a danger of a generation lost—a younger generation—from the covid pandemic. It is absolutely right that we locked down and protected the most vulnerable, but I am concerned to make sure that other voices, other concerns and issues, and indeed future pandemics are not ignored when we make the decisions about how our rules should be formed. It is therefore a great delight to be able to speak.

I pay great tribute to all those who work in particular in the health and care systems in Sussex. We have had the lowest number of covid deaths in the south-east, but we have the highest concentration of care homes. To me, that demonstrates that Sussex has been doing something well. It is important that we learn the lessons of this pandemic nationally, because clearly some things have not worked as well as they should have done. I pay tribute to everyone in Sussex for what they have done.

On the easing of the lockdown, which I welcome, I want to touch on schools. I am particularly concerned that some schoolchildren will have lost six months of their time in the classroom by September, when we hope they get back into them, although it is by no means guaranteed that they will. It is also a tragedy in terms of the attainment gap among schools.



Those schools with the resources and with the ability to put more money into the system will have innovated and have tried new things to ensure that their pupils still follow their teachers teaching by visual aids or others. Yet other schools have not at all had that level of innovation. I have certainly experienced that, and I am concerned about the young people who have lost that direction from, and interaction with, not only their teachers but having other pupils around them, their peers. I am very concerned about what has been missed out.

As we ease the lockdown, a herculean effort is essential from Government and the education sector to make sure that our schools are open in September—but we also have to consider the risks involved. We know that the chances of young people being impacted seriously by covid is incredibly low risk. We have to make sure that teachers are protected, because they may be higher risk, but the young people are not high risk. We need to take that risk factor into account when we look at what is acceptable or not. We need to take more risk in our schools in that regard, not treating them the same as a care home setting, where of course things have to be different.

I would also like to hear the Government set out very clearly to schools that they will not be absolutely strictly liable.

There are a lot of scare stories going around right now, which means that headteachers feel that they cannot take decisions that would lead them to liability. This is guidance only, and it is important that the Department for Education clarifies how it should operate and that schools do not feel paranoid about opening in September.

I also want to nod towards the lockdown easing for businesses. I represent a rural county. We do not have big businesses that can support staff like others, perhaps, where the balance sheet can. As a result, I am particularly concerned about job losses. I know that Opposition MPs have found it quite annoying when Conservative MPs stand up and talk with pride about the jobs that have been created. That has actually been one of my proudest moments as a Conservative MP, because, to me, when you give someone a job you give them hope, you give them a livelihood and you increase their life chances. For those rates to go in the opposite direction will be absolutely destroying for me.

I want to hear the Government put the message out that, again, we need to take a little more risk. We need to unlock and make sure that people are going into shops and restaurants and spending money. The Government have pumped £200 billion into this episode. There is a limit to how much can be put in. We now need to ask people to use their common sense to try to return to some normality and accept that this risk will be inherent and will remain with us. If we do not do that, there will be a whole generation of lost souls, and that concerns me greatly. I will end there, Chair. Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to speak.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Neale Hanvey [V]: Thank you, Chair. May I add my thanks to the petitioners and all those involved in making this debate possible this afternoon? I am joining you from Fife, and I pay tribute to the researchers in my Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituency who have played their part in identifying dexamethasone as an effective early component of medical treatment.

In Scotland, it is our unapologetic objective to eradicate this virus, and we are making good progress driving down the numbers, thus preventing the risk of resurgence. These bold words are not bravado—there is no place for such complacency—but the commitment by the public across Scotland to control and suppress this virus is thankfully having a real and demonstrable impact.

The conscientious and measured national response has widely been attributed to the clear, consistent and calm messaging from the Scottish Government throughout the crisis. As a direct result, the Scottish Government have now been able to move to a zero covid strategy, with a detailed route map to the easing of lockdown based on the elimination of covid-19 and a constant drive to lower infection and mortality rates. This is rightly underpinned by a steadfast refusal to be satisfied as long as people are still dying.

Having now reached stage 3 of the route map, further easing will continue to be in line with containment of the virus. The message in Scotland is clear and concise: stay safe, protect others and save lives. A key driver in Holyrood's decision to ease restrictions has been evident in official data, which indicates that the covid-19 death rate in Scotland has been in decline for eight consecutive weeks. Scottish Government modelling suggests that the number of infectious people has fallen by more than a quarter each week since mid-May.

Yet, despite much higher levels of infection, hospitalisation and mortality, the UK Government over that same period have been easing England's lockdown restrictions more rapidly than the devolved Governments of Edinburgh, Cardiff or Stormont. Nicola Sturgeon has been clear that public health, not politics, must drive coronavirus, and I believe that this is where the main divergence can be seen in the approaches north and south of the border. Yes, despite the Prime Minister's farcical protestations of late, a border exists between Scotland and England.

South of that border, it increasingly looks like the Prime Minister considers his political survival as pre-eminent to the health of the very public he was elected to serve. If not this, then what drove the hyperbole and hype of "super-Saturday"—reopening of pubs, restaurants, hairdressers, hotels, museums and cinemas in England—on 4 July, with some Tory MPs branding it "independence day"? As alcohol put paid to any form of social distancing in Soho, Susan Michie, professor of health psychology at University College London, condemned the decision as "a disaster waiting to happen" and "exactly what we should not be doing".



HOUSE OF COMMONS

At the end of May, I was joined by more than 75 parliamentary colleagues in writing to the Prime Minister to raise the distressing experiences and very real fears of consultant medical staff across the UK of a premature relaxation of lockdown in England. Almost two months later, that letter, and the concerns of those doctors, remain unanswered. As we move to each new phase in easing lockdown, we must never forget the dreadful loss of life. At least 45,000 people in the UK have succumbed, each and every one of them a potentially avoidable tragedy had we only locked down earlier.

The Government's own scientific advisers warn of this risk. Professor John Edmunds, a member of SAGE, said that the UK Government's failure to lock down sooner had "cost a lot of lives". I reiterate the question I posed to the Health Secretary last month, to which I did not receive a satisfactory response: if the Government are no longer following the science provided by their own advisers, whose advice are they following?

In closing, never before in modern times have the words of Winston Churchill been more apt: those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Let that not be us.

Q9 **Chair:** Thank you. I call Kate Griffiths.

Kate Griffiths [V]: I thank the Petitions Committee for holding this session and allowing Members to participate virtually. All MPs have been petitioned by constituents on a wide variety of issues. I will raise just a couple of the issues I have been contacted about.

As lockdown eases and our pubs and bars begin to reopen, I pay tribute to the hard-working hospitality industry, which has stepped up and introduced the necessary measures to keep customers safe. Many businesses will be operating at reduced capacity and under much financial pressure but have overwhelmingly adopted the necessary precautions to safely welcome back their regulars.

However, this sudden rush to return to a sense of social normality is causing significant problems for policing. As the chief inspector of Staffordshire police recently said to me, the night-time economy experienced extraordinary demand, usually only seen on new year's eve. On the night pubs reopened, a Staffordshire police officer was attacked while dealing with revellers in Uttoxeter. It was a cowardly attack on someone doing a difficult job at this time, and I hope he is making a speedy recovery.

Across east Staffordshire, the significant increase in antisocial behaviour and public disorder is not only around pubs and in urban areas but across our open spaces and among our local communities, such as at the Craythorne Road playing fields in Rolleston, in my constituency. As lockdown started to ease, large groups of young people began gathering on the playing fields at night, and what started out as small groups of local youngsters soon grew to 100 to 150 young adults every night, with some



even travelling in from further afield. This brought with it significant alcohol and drug consumption, serious acts of vandalism, noise levels that impact the lives of anyone living nearby and a litter problem that residents have never seen before. Discussions with the parish council and the police have centred on whether a public space protection order might be implemented, but with an already stretched police force it is hard to see how this could be effectively enforced.

It is essential that we try to find ways to promote and support youth projects and activities that would provide some focus for younger residents over the summer period. I have every sympathy for those who have been unable to socialise with friends and peers as colleges and universities closed. They are now looking for opportunities to get together as lockdown eases. I suspect that the forward planning required to visit bars and pubs is making them more relaxed about participating in outside gatherings, which are much more appealing to them, although I am not sure nearby residents agree. I hope that, over the summer, we will see a return of outside events, which might provide some focus on the opportunities to gather socially and help deter those intent on setting up illegal raves, which seem to be popping up across the county, further adding to the demands on police resources.

I also thank our environmental and public health professionals. They also find themselves stretched as lockdown measures are eased, not only in terms of cleaning up the litter caused by these gatherings but in ensuring that those businesses that are opening do so safely. As the Government announced the welcome—but sudden—opening of leisure and beauty services, our local authority teams that monitor compliance were inundated with incidents being reported. With so many additional guidelines and rules in place, although many businesses are working hard to get it right, some do, unfortunately, get it wrong. I hope the Minister will consider the additional pressures being placed on these teams as we continue to emerge from lockdown.

The final point I would like to quickly make is in relation to the wearing of face coverings. There are a number of petitions about transparent face coverings. I welcome the Government's decision that face coverings should now be worn, in a bid to reduce transmission of covid-19, but I urge the Minister to consider the impact that this will have on those who are deaf or have hearing problems. These people rely heavily on facial expression and lip reading in order to communicate. It is vital that we take action to ensure they are not ostracised by these measures. Would the Government consider commissioning transparent, breathable facemasks to ensure they are quickly available for those who need them, both in care settings and in the wider community? That would remove the barriers to communication, and would be a huge opportunity to make a real difference to people's lives.

Q10 **Chair:** Thank you. I now come to Lilian Greenwood.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lilian Greenwood: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to your Committee for ensuring this session is taking place and providing us with an opportunity to raise concerns on behalf of our constituents.

The potential impact of coronavirus on the sectors that are still unable to open, and which may not be able to open for some time, is deeply worrying. Theatres, music venues, indoor sports arenas and beauty salons contribute billions to our economy every year, yet are facing a cliff edge. Without urgent and specific efforts for each sector, these places—which are so important to our communities—simply may not survive.

Hon. Members may not be aware of this, but the biggest indoor audience sport in the UK is professional ice hockey, with 30,000 fans filling arenas every week in the season during normal times. I am very proud to have the National Ice Centre in my constituency, and that the Nottingham Panthers are—well, obviously the best, but among the top 10 clubs that make up the UK's Elite Ice Hockey League. The league directly generates £6 million in revenue for the Treasury each year, with ancillary spend at the 10 venues plus venue staff, merchandise sales, council tax and so on doubling that figure.

Until the pandemic, elite ice hockey was self-sufficient, but the league lost over £500,000 through the cancellation of the season's climax play-off finals weekend in April, and another £1 million through the cancellation of league games. Unlike those sports that have TV deals or major sponsorships, ice hockey relies on spectators being able to attend games in order to survive this crisis. According to Gary Moran, who is the Nottingham Panthers' general manager and speaks for the EIHL, they could survive with half capacity in their venues, with fans spread out wearing masks and adopting other safety procedures. That, alongside a small amount of Government support, would allow them to play a successful and safe six-month season. They can make plans to get through this crisis, but they need certainty and support from Government to do so. I hope the Minister will urge her colleague, the Sports Minister, to meet with the EIHL to discuss their needs.

I appreciate the Chancellor's efforts to protect our economy. However, particularly for sectors such as live entertainment and theatres, those efforts do not go far enough. Theatres such as the Nottingham Playhouse need a timetable for when they can reopen, even if things have to look very different from normal. The package of support for the arts sector was widely welcomed last week. Grants are all well and good, but theatres not knowing how long they need to make those grants stretch for leaves them unable to plan to survive. On Sunday, the Minister for Digital and Culture said on Sky News that the Government want to be able to open theatres indoors "shortly". I do not know what "shortly" means, and I hope the Minister can clarify whether we can expect that announcement this week, this month, or perhaps before the end of the year. We also do not know how and when the £1.57 billion package is to be distributed, so perhaps she can shed some light on that.

Research conducted by Media Insight Consulting has shown that live entertainment and theatre generate £11.25 billion each year, but this is not just about money. It is about people—the sector supports over 600,000 jobs that are currently hanging in the balance—and about the vital role that theatres play in our communities. For many of us, Christmas is not Christmas without a trip to the panto. Maybe this year, safety demands that there be no shouting, no joining in with the dancing and no interval for ice creams, but can it happen at all? For Nottingham Playhouse to spend money preparing a panto for November, it needs to know now that it will be able to open.

Theatres like Nottingham do incredible work to inspire the next generation. Drama and performance are essential in supporting children's wider learning. We know when schools will return, but when can youth theatre return? When can schools take a group of students to the theatre?

There has been good news in recent weeks for certain sectors—hairdressers, barbers and beauty salons have, thankfully, been allowed to reopen. However, beauty therapists still face a partial lockdown as they are unable to carry out any facial treatments. This puts at risk thousands of jobs overwhelmingly held by women, and black and Asian minority ethnic women in particular. The Beauty Guild, the UK's largest trade body representing more than 16,000 professionals, has written to the Prime Minister urging him to reconsider his policy forbidding facial treatments. It makes a very good point when it states, "While it is understandable that some treatments must remain off-limits, there is no scientific reason why eyebrow treatments pose more of a threat than beard trimming."

The sectors that I have highlighted today are not asking for things to go back to the way they were. They have been patient. They appreciate that not everything will be the same, that there will be social distancing and that some things remain off limits. But if they cannot offer their services, they will need extra support to survive, so I hope that when the Minister responds she will say what they are going to do so that we do not see mass redundancies and we do not lose these cherished institutions from our communities altogether.

Q11 **Chair:** Thank you. Over to Tim Farron.

Tim Farron: Thank you, Chair, and thanks to the Committee as well for this incredibly important opportunity for us to discuss how we ease restrictions and build back better. I want to run through a few issues in the time I have available and echo many of the comments made earlier by the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who chairs the all-party group on cancer. Undoubtedly, we are facing the potential for more people to lose their lives as a consequence of cancer treatments delayed because of covid than people who lose their lives to covid itself.

The reasons are clear. Many chemotherapy sessions and surgeries have been postponed, often for good clinical reasons, because of risk to immunity and risk of infection, but often for less good reasons. Originally,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Government's guidance was that there should be delays, deferrals and cancellations of treatment, irrespective of whether it was clinically justified. So I add my support to the Catch Up With Cancer campaign led by the parents of Kelly Smith, who, as we heard, died aged 31 and whose life was undoubtedly shortened because her treatment was delayed. We need to catch up with cancer and make sure that radiotherapy, for example, is used as a substitution treatment. It is being brought to places such as Westmorland General Hospital to be delivered closer to people's homes, but also as a substitution treatment across the country so that we do not do what the Government are planning to do, which is to get back to normal by Christmas. We need to act now to save thousands and thousands of lives.

The biggest employer in my constituency, hospitality and tourism, is a special case in our economy. It is the largest employer in Cumbria, the fourth largest in the country, and of course it operates seasonally on a feast and famine basis. We know that covid-19 came in at the end of the winter famine; the feast has been cancelled, and the Government's plan at the moment is to cease support as the next famine begins.

We have already had a 314% increase in unemployment in my constituency—the biggest in the country—and we have the largest percentage of people on furlough at 40%. UKInbound research shows that 60% of its members expect to make redundancies next month, in anticipation of the furlough scheme tapering out, and 53% of its members expect their businesses to fail within six months. We are heading for huge hardship unless the Government agree the package proposed by me, Cumbria Tourism, MPs from across the House and tourism organisations from Visit County Durham to Visit Cornwall. The Government must fast-track a specialist package for hospitality and tourism to save the industry.

I also want the Minister to urge the Treasury and the Chancellor to end the exclusion of the 3 million people who are getting no support whatsoever. That includes people who set up their businesses within the last 12 months or so—new entrepreneurs, whom we desperately need to lead the fight back and who have the imagination and the creativity to do so. They have taken risks to set up their businesses and perhaps have very little money left—nipped in the bud at just the moment they cannot afford it. They are directors of small limited companies, and new starters as well. There are many of those people in my constituency; around one in four of my constituents work for themselves. The Government must intervene and end the exclusion of those people, who are facing desperate hardship.

While there is no support for those desperate people excluded from the scheme, there is, thanks to the Government, a £15,000 bung to people who own a second home. What absolutely shocking priorities. While I understand the motivation behind the stamp duty cut and I do not oppose it, to extend it to people who are already fortunate enough to have a home and now want to buy a second one in a constituency such as mine, where many communities are dying because of an excess of second-home



ownership that squeezes the life out of them, is completely unacceptable. It is the wrong priority. The Government should stop giving bungs to second-home owners and instead meet the needs of the excluded 3 million.

Finally, the Government are making a very foolish move in deciding in the midst of this battle to fight back against the coronavirus and the economic damage it has brought with it that the thing we desperately need is a completely pointless top-down reorganisation of local government in Cumbria. That is exactly what we need, isn't it, when we are trying to fight the coronavirus and the economic damage it has wrought—to set institution against institution, to waste money, to paralyse social care and education and to make local leaders contemplate their navels for the next two years? It is a complete waste of time, and it takes our eye off the ball.

Instead, I urge the Minister to make sure that the Government's priorities are to catch up with cancer, to save our biggest employer—hospitality and tourism—and to help those who have been excluded.

Q12 **Chair:** Thank you. I now go to Marion Fellows.

Marion Fellows [V]: Thank you, Chair. I also thank all the constituents in Motherwell and Wishaw who have signed the various petitions that are being debated today. It is incumbent on all of us MPs to listen to what folk are telling us.

The SNP's main message as lockdown is eased is to stay safe, protect others and save lives. Now we are in stage three or stage four of our route map from lockdown, further easing will continue to be in line with containing the virus. A formal review of lockdown restrictions is due on 30 July. In the meantime, the First Minister has asked everyone in Scotland to #KeepTheHeid.

At this point, I would like to express my personal delight at being able to hug my granddaughters again. It has been a very long time coming.

The virus continues to pose real risks to public health and the economy could be devastated by a second peak. The Academy of Medical Sciences warns that a winter resurgence of covid-19 in the UK could result in more cases and deaths than the recent peak unless action is taken now to prepare.

People across Scotland are doing the right thing and following the rules. Our Government's cautious approach to coming out of lockdown is working. We have gone a full week with no recorded deaths from covid-19. However, yesterday's figures from the Office for National Statistics show that lockdown easing alone is not enough to regrow our economy. We need an £80 billion stimulus to protect firms and household incomes. The ONS has described the UK's economy as "in the doldrums" after new analysis showed that the economy is now 24.5% smaller than it was in February and that it grew by just 1.8% in May.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The £5 billion UK Government measures announced by the Prime Minister did not include any new money. The Chancellor said he would be spending £30 billion, with £804 million for the Scottish Government, only £21 million of which covers economic development. We will wait to see the small print, having been short-changed so often recently. The remaining funds for Scotland will be spent by the UK Government. In contrast, Germany announced a stimulus package of 4% of its GDP—the equivalent for the UK would be £80 billion.

Where we have the power, the Scottish Government have spent £4 billion on covid and for businesses, which is more than £2.3 billion above Barnett consequential. However, our hands are tied. The Fraser of Allander Institute is clear. The Scottish Government can borrow up to £450 million per annum for capital investment. For resource spending, they can borrow up to £600 million each year, but only for forecast error and cash management; we cannot borrow to fund discretionary resource spending.

The UK Government must heed the recommendation of the Higgins report, which states that the urgent need to access low-cost debt requires an accelerated review of the fiscal framework and a significant increase in access to capital investment to support an investment-led recovery.

The furlough scheme must be extended so that firms and workers do not have to decide between their health and their livelihoods. Crassly describing the end of furlough as a tough moment shows how detached from reality the Chancellor is. It will be a personal tragedy for many, but the Tories seem intent on sinking their helpful lifeboat. The House of Commons Library estimates that the number of unemployed could rise to 3.8 million people without intervention. Although the traineeships, apprentices and jobcentre coaches announced in the fiscal statement are really welcome, they will not provide the level of income that the furlough scheme has provided. The self-employment income support scheme should also have been extended beyond the planned second and final payment in August, so that businesses could rebuild.

Instead of loading businesses with unsustainable debt, the Treasury must now heed the calls of the SNP and industry and turn its interruption and bounce-back loan schemes into equity or, where appropriate, grants. Refusing to support the needs of each part of the UK will undermine recovery by forcing firms and workers to choose between local measures and bankruptcy.

With hospitality opening up again in Scotland, we welcome the UK Government's action on a hospitality VAT cut following sustained pressure from SNP MPs. The SNP calls on the UK Government to consider a reduction in VAT for the hospitality sector, levelling the playing field with other EU nations and creating new jobs by reducing the general VAT rate from 20% to 15%. The autumn Budget should implement SNP demands for a cut of 2 percentage points in employer's national insurance contributions to support firms and boost jobs.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

In conclusion, Chair, I pay tribute to your Committee for the innovative and helpful way in which it has provided a means for Back Benchers such as me to express our views in this way. Thank you.

Q13 **Chair:** Thank you, Marion. I call Vicky Foxcroft.

Vicky Foxcroft [V]: Thank you, Chair, for enabling those of us who are shielding to have the opportunity to participate today. Sadly, we have been excluded from far too many debates over recent weeks. Like many others, I have been asking why that is the case when we had a system that worked. Should there be a second wave, how will Parliament ensure that my colleagues and I can fully participate?

From the beginning of this crisis, I have been open about my compromised immune system, which is due to the medication that I am on for rheumatoid arthritis. Since then, I have been contacted by hundreds of other people who are shielding. I thank them and my constituents for their unwavering support. However, they are also angry that their voices are not being properly heard. Shielding and disabled people want to see that lessons have been learnt, and my constituents want me to be able to fully represent them. Throughout this pandemic, disabled and shielding people have felt like an afterthought, so I would like to use this opportunity to ask the questions that they want answered.

Understandably, shielding people are very anxious about returning to work. I have asked numerous Ministers, including the Prime Minister, how individuals can be sure that their workplace is covid secure. Will employers be legally required to conduct individual risk assessments? If an employer does not do that, what sanctions will the Government issue? What protection do employees have if their employer cannot guarantee their safety? Leading on from that, what measures have the Government got in place to ensure that there is no increase in unemployment among disabled people?

On welfare, what efforts have the Government made to uprate legacy benefits? They managed to increase universal credit by 20 quid a week almost overnight, yet several months on, and despite repeated questioning by our shadow Work and Pensions team, we see no attempt to increase ESA, JSA, DLA or PIP. Surely that could have been rectified by now to ensure that disabled people are not left worse off, or is this a conscious policy decision?

As we all know, our unpaid carers are doing amazing and often unrecognised work. Carer's allowance pays just £67.25 a week. Are the Government going to review that given that unpaid carers save the economy £132 billion a year? On the Care Act, when will easements be brought to an end?

On schools, many constituents, teachers and unions have been in touch with me about schools returning in September. Some children will be going back to school in September after a period of hunger and trauma,



and will be behind in their learning. Teachers will be expected to support them without additional help. That cannot be right. Teachers need resources to support children's mental health; they need support for kids with education, health and care assessments and plans and additional needs. Schools need emergency money for extra cleaning. Will the Government provide the resources for schools to ensure that they are safe and welcoming of all children? Will children on education, health and care plans be guaranteed a place? How will the Government ensure that schools do not use spurious excuses for not having children return? Schools must be sufficiently supported to ensure that no child is left behind.

We all know that good communication is key. At the start of the pandemic, communication with disabled people left wanting at best. Should there be a second wave, it is absolutely vital that we see improvements, but that cannot happen too late in the process. Will the Minister commit her Government to ensuring that disabled people and shielders are fully consulted at every stage?

To finish, I know that I have asked a lot of questions in a short time. If the Minister cannot answer them all now, I am happy to receive written responses, but I do want answers—as does everyone who has contacted me since the start of the pandemic.

Q14 **Chair:** Thanks, Vicky. I call Ian Byrne.

Ian Byrne [V]: Thank you, Chair and the Committee. I also thank Vicky for that absolutely magnificent contribution. It was superb and an honour to listen to.

As we move further out of lockdown, it seems to me that we are doing so without a strategy. A key part of a strategy should be an effective track and trace system to underpin the easing of lockdown. The Government pledged that we would have a world-beating test, track and trace system up and running by 1 June. More than six weeks later, the Government's system has cost £10 billion and is still not fully working. That is hardly surprising given the track record of many of the private providers to which this Government, in their ideological blindness, continue to turn and which continue to fail this country time and again. It reminds me of the football managerial merry-go-round, where continued failure counts for nothing.

As we move further out of lockdown, it is essential that a robust track and trace system is in place—one that actually works. If there is one thing that our Prime Minister has been consistent about during the pandemic, it is his inconsistency. His mixed messages have led to widespread public confusion and a loss of trust in the Government's handling of the crisis, which has at times weakened the public's resolve and undermined the public health effort. The onus for managing the covid-19 crisis, as we increasingly move out of lockdown, must not be placed on the public alone. It is for the Government to protect life and ensure public health and safety.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We must also focus on the protection of all workers. While I welcome the Health Secretary's announcement yesterday that it will be mandatory for people in England to wear face coverings in shops from 24 July, it should not have taken so long for Government to provide this guidance to keep our shop workers safe. With the death rate among sales assistants 75% higher among men and 60% higher among women than in the general population, the Government should have reacted sooner to protect shop workers, and we must see an end to such dithering.

We must all be deeply concerned, as we come out of lockdown, about the inequality of society, and the structural weaknesses that the pandemic has shone a light on in the past few months. I fully support increasing calls from across the House for urgent measures to ensure that people living in the private rented sector who have lost income due to the pandemic are not forced into homelessness when the temporary ban on evictions ends in August. In my West Derby constituency, many of my constituents are in debt and terrified of the impending threat of eviction as a direct result of the covid crisis.

The simple fact is that without emergency legislation, thousands of people would be forced on to the streets. In the past few weeks, I have spoken to housing advisers and law centres, where people are in tears about this impending humanitarian disaster. Shelter believes that up to 500,000 people will be at risk of eviction. Such figures should chill everyone in the House to the bone. I urge the Minister to maintain the funding required to keep all our citizens safe and to honour the Government's commitment earlier this year to do whatever it takes to protect life in these unpredictable times.

Last week, the co-chair of the APPG for ending homelessness, Bob Blackman, called on the Government to act urgently and stop people who were homeless prior to the pandemic being forced to return to the streets as emergency lockdown measures ease. The hon. Gentleman told Sky News that an emergency law must be passed urgently, otherwise people could be turned out on to the streets. He said that there is no reason why such emergency legislation could not pass in a single day, and he implored the Minister to act.

Councils around the country—including Liverpool City Council—have done excellent work, pulling out all the stops, to support those experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. Emergency legislation and ongoing funding commitments from Government are now essential to enable this work to continue and ensure that no one returns to rough sleeping.

Shortly before the pandemic hit, millions of people were already struggling, debt was at a record high, homelessness and food bank use were soaring, and since the crisis started, pay has fallen steepest among the lowest earners. Yet there is still no strategy from Government to support our most vulnerable people. We need to look at measures such as increased council funding, reforms to the welfare system, a council tax



HOUSE OF COMMONS

freeze, increased hardship funds for councils and specific support for renters.

Years of low wages, benefits cuts and casualised labour, and a 10-year race to the bottom under consecutive Tory Governments mean that many of those changes were long overdue before the covid-19 outbreak. No more sticking plasters: we need a plan to help and support people in dire straits. Earlier this year, in my maiden speech, I called for a genuine safety net to protect people from a pandemic that is not their fault. I repeat that call today.

Q15 **Chair:** Thank you. I call Ruth Jones.

Ruth Jones: It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I congratulate you, Chair, and your colleagues on the Petitions Committee on holding the first ever hybrid e-petitions debate. Your collective and cross-party tenacity has ensured that parliamentarians here and virtually are able to do our job, which is to hold the Government to account. Sitting on this side of the horseshoe, however, is quite a different experience, and I will certainly treat witnesses to Select Committees with more sympathy in future.

There are a number of different petitions relating to the easing of covid lockdown restrictions before us. As I am sure is the case for many across the House, this debate is important to my constituents in Newport West, and my comments will be based on the many emails, demands and concerns raised with me and my team in recent weeks.

I will start by saying thank you. Thank you to those who followed the rules and those who stayed at home and resisted the temptation to test their eyes by making a 60-mile round trip. Thank you to those who missed family funerals, cancelled weddings and went without seeing their families and loved ones for so long. My message to them all is, "You stayed home, and, in turn, you saved lives." I also want to pay tribute to those who lost their lives in Newport West, across south Wales and in all parts of the UK. We mourn their deaths and will honour their memories.

The fact that almost 300,000 people in all parts of the UK have signed petitions relating to the easing of lockdown restrictions shows just how vital it is that Parliament discusses the way forward in an open and transparent way.

We all know how difficult recent weeks and months have been for so many people of all ages and from all communities. I can absolutely understand the powerlessness, the rage and the fear, and the general malaise that many in our communities are experiencing, and the desperate feeling of wanting things to go back to what we knew as normal. But there is going to be no quick return to normal as we knew it, and our task now, as restrictions are eased and the country opens up again, is to reflect on how best to mould and shape the new normal that lies ahead.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Before my election to this place, I spent over 30 years working in the NHS as a physiotherapist. I saw first hand the wonderful life-saving and life-changing work that NHS staff do for us and our families every single day. As restrictions are eased, we must be mindful that those on the frontline put themselves at risk by helping us, so in our actions we must help the NHS to help us.

Even in New Zealand, where the strong Labour Government led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has shown how differently this crisis could have been handled, the virus has not gone away, and that is true for the UK too. We have not left the danger zone, so caution and wisdom must rule the day, because the future of our economy and country depends on it.

In bringing my remarks to a close I want to pay tribute to all the small businesses in Newport West that are hit so hard by the economic consequences of the virus. The easing of restrictions is vital to keeping them open and helping our local economies to recover. Like many others speaking in this debate today, I am deeply concerned at the potential job losses that are coming in the months ahead. Although we have heard about some major companies making redundancies, such as BA and Airbus, I am just as concerned about job losses in smaller companies, and the knock-on effect on their families and our communities.

The Welsh Labour Government have provided strong and authoritative leadership, and we saw that when the First Minister, Mark Drakeford, revealed that he had moved out of his own home so as not to put the lives of his loved ones at risk. With that in mind, and as we look to the easing of lockdown restrictions, I call on us all to show leadership and be mindful of the impact of our behaviour on the lives of those in our communities in all parts of the United Kingdom.

Q16 **Chair:** Thank you. I call Wera Hobhouse.

Wera Hobhouse: For over seven months the world has lived with a deadly virus. Governments of different persuasions have dealt with it differently. Some quickly understood its lethal potential and imposed far-reaching and very restrictive measures on their citizens. Others played down the health risks in the hope that the economy would not be affected and the virus would naturally disappear. Our Government did something in between.

Lockdown has imposed heavy restrictions on all our citizens. It has brought our economy to its knees but the virus is still with us today. So where should our priorities be? We must be very clear. The protection of lives is a moral and political obligation of each Government and we should protect lives beginning with the most vulnerable: the elderly, those with underlying health problems, people on lower incomes and from ethnic minority groups. This Government failed all of them. As a result we have the highest death toll in Europe and the failing messages from our Government continue seven months on.



In a crisis people need clear leadership. Arguing that difficult decisions in unprecedented times should be left to the individual because we live in a liberal society is a big misunderstanding of what a values-based liberal society is. The core principle of my liberalism is that my liberty is protected only to the extent that it does not diminish the liberty of others. From this flows that in this health crisis I am at liberty to protect myself but I must not knowingly endanger others.

Face coverings are a very good example. They are primarily effective because they protect others in case I am an asymptomatic carrier of the disease, have only very mild symptoms or am in the early stages of infection. The YouGov covid tracker indicates that currently only 38% of Britons are wearing face coverings, compared with 90% in Singapore, 88% in Spain and 73% even in the US. We are at the bottom of this league table. The most comprehensive study carried out by the WHO so far analysed data from 172 studies in 16 countries. It found that wearing a face covering can reduce the risk of spreading the virus by 80%.

Further evidence is emerging from other countries that there are many more silent carriers of the virus than previously thought. People with no or mild symptoms are still contagious and could be responsible for nearly 80% of the spread of the virus, so why did face coverings not become mandatory much earlier, and why has wearing them not already become the norm in most indoor settings? I would argue that we here on the parliamentary estate should wear face coverings whenever possible. Social distancing is unfortunately quite poorly observed by MPs—not all, but some—standing around in clusters, seemingly with no cares in the world about the deadly virus that is still among us.

Our Government have come up with many excuses about evidence emerging only now—nonsense. Any Government who cared about the safety and wellbeing of all their citizens would put caution and protection at the core of their policies. Individual politicians in Government would set a personal example of the right thing to do and show that they cared about the nearly 48,000 lives that have already been lost. This deadly virus is still with us. Reducing risk whenever and by whatever means possible must be at the heart of our policies. The spotlight is clearly on this Government, and I would say that wearing a face covering is a core and vital part of easing the lockdown.

Q17 **Chair:** I now call on the Front-Bench spokesperson for the SNP, Dr Philippa Whitford, who has 10 minutes to respond to the debate.

Dr Whitford [V]: This pandemic is not over. Globally, there are almost 200,000 new cases every day, and that is just those with access to a test. The spread of covid depends on three factors: the contagiousness of the virus, how long each patient is infectious and the number of contacts they have during that time. It is that last bit that we can manipulate. In March, with soaring covid cases, we went into lockdown. That was an emergency measure to bring the surge under control by stopping all contacts, but it was a blunderbuss. The ideal is to find and test those who may have the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

virus, trace their contacts and isolate those individuals, not the whole of society.

One problem has been asymptomatic spread, whereby carriers of the virus without any symptoms can still spread it to others. That is why face coverings are important to reduce the projection of viral droplets into the air when we speak. They have been recommended in Scotland since the end of April and were becoming more common, but making them mandatory, first on public transport and more recently in shops, has now raised the uptake to over 90%. It is bizarre that we are still having this debate in the UK when masks are already mandatory in almost two thirds of all countries. The Royal Society carried out a review that highlights the contribution they can make. Hopefully, research will help to produce transparent but breathable masks, which will make life easier for those who depend on lip-reading.

Like keeping 2 metres apart as much as possible, all these measures are simply to reduce the virus's being spread by those of us who may not even know we are infected. While some never have symptoms, many become infectious just two days before they become unwell. Since the incubation period is only about five days, time is of the essence, as the earliest contacts they may have infected are already on day 3 when the patient gets symptoms and goes for a test. As well as getting tested, the results need to get to public health teams so that they can trace the contacts, and isolate them before they too become infectious.

The Secretary of State rarely mentions it, but it is isolation that stops the spread of covid. That is why a test, trace and isolate system is critical to easing lockdown, and it needs to be fast. Unfortunately, the Secretary of State has been more focused on the number of tests than on creating a system. On 30 April, he celebrated reaching his famous target of 100,000 tests, but only by double-counting some nose and throat swabs as separate tests and including those that were not carried out, but just posted out. Indeed, that week 95,000 home test were posted out, but while less than a quarter were returned, all were counted towards the target. That drove Sir David Norgrove of the UK Statistics Authority to say: "The aim seems to be to show the largest possible number of tests, even at the expense of understanding." The UK Government often seem to have put more energy into managing the media than managing the epidemic.

Instead of providing extra funding to expand NHS lab capacity, the Government set up a completely separate network of commercial labs with Deloitte. They were not connected to the four national health services across the UK, and although the patient might get the results eventually, they were not reported to GPs or local public health teams. Incredibly, it turns out that that requirement was not specified in the contract.

Detailed data was made available in England only in late June, when it suddenly became clear that Leicester had had almost 900 cases in less



HOUSE OF COMMONS

than a month. Within a week, it was back under lockdown. While the Prime Minister congratulates himself on his whack-a-mole approach, for the people of Leicester it feels just as bad as the national lockdown. The social and economic impact of a local lockdown is exactly the same, especially as they have received little funding from the UK Government. For isolation to be acceptable, there needs to be financial support for those who are asked not to go into work for two weeks, and for any community put back into lockdown.

Although initially we had exactly the same problem—getting results from the commercial labs—Scotland's test and protect system has been up and running since the end of May, and is based on local public health networks. It was able to pick up and trace a tiny outbreak of 12 cases in the south of Scotland and stop any further spread. That is the level of precision that is needed to drive an elimination strategy, which the Scottish Government committed to in May. That does not mean that there will never be any more covid cases, but the aim is to stop community spread. Following that approach, Scotland has had no covid-positive deaths in the past week, and only five new cases today.

Allowing covid-19 to grumble on at its current level in England would lead to another 27,000 covid deaths by next spring, and that is without a second wave. There is no sign of the world-beating contract tracing app that we used to hear so much about, and Serco says that its system will not be fully functioning until September. Instead of outsourcing, the UK Government should invest in rebuilding local public health teams in England, and ensure they get the data to spot an outbreak and the individual test results to deal with it.

All across the world, from the US to Australia, we see the gains of lockdown being thrown away by releasing it too quickly without robust test, trace and isolate systems in place. We are all aware of the negative impacts of lockdown on the diagnosis and treatment of other health conditions and on people's livelihoods, but painting this crisis as public health versus the economy is false. Most people seeing the death toll are worried for their safety and that of their families. They simply don't trust politicians, who suddenly seem to have switched their focus from public safety to the economy, when they tell them to come out, eat, drink and be merry.

There are some industries that simply won't recover quickly, and the Government should be providing ongoing support to those sectors, including tourism, aviation and entertainment. To ease lockdown safely right across the British Isles, England needs to join Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Ireland in following New Zealand's example and committing to an elimination strategy. That is the best way to ease the burden on NHS services so they can deal with other urgent diseases such as cancer. It is also the best way to get the economy moving. If we drive the virus right down, people would have real confidence that it is safe to send their children to school, go back to work or go out for a meal.

The experience of the last five months has made us see what is really important in life. We have seen volunteers, health and social care staff and key workers putting themselves in harm's way to help the rest of us. Indeed, some have lost their lives and we pay tribute to them. We owe it to them to ensure that their efforts were not in vain.

As we carefully come out of lockdown and get back to work or meet up with friends and loved ones, we all need to stick to the rules to protect ourselves and to protect each other. We cannot risk a second wave taking us back to square one and putting us all back in lockdown.

Q18 **Chair:** Thank you. I now call Helen Hayes to respond for the Labour Front Bench.

Helen Hayes: Thank you very much, Chair. I am grateful to you and the Petitions Committee for enabling this important debate to take place, and to all hon. Members who have spoken in it. The level of engagement of members of the public with each of the petitions we are debating today, on gyms and leisure centres, salons and tattoo parlours, the reopening of schools, and compulsory quarantine for travellers arriving in the UK, is an indication of the breadth and depth of the impact that coronavirus is having on so many areas of our economy and community life, and of the anxiety that it is causing for people across the country in relation to health and the ability to see loved ones, to work and to support family.

The debate has provided an opportunity for Members to speak powerfully of the impact of coronavirus on their constituents. I am particularly glad that it has provided an opportunity for Members who are shielding and self-isolating to represent their constituents too. I do not have time to mention all the contributions that have been made in the debate, but I will highlight a few that made particularly important and pertinent points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), chair of the APPG on cancer, spoke powerfully of the impact that coronavirus is having on access to cancer treatments and the lives that are at risk as a consequence. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) highlighted the continuing tragedy of covid deaths and the appalling plight of asylum seekers forced to live in unsafe accommodation at this time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) highlighted the vital importance of support for theatres and clarity on when they will be able to reopen, and of additional support for the beauty sector, which employs so many people, many of them women and women from BAME backgrounds.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) spoke powerfully of her experience of shielding and the experience of many who are shielding and vulnerable, the importance of having a process to guarantee covid-secure workplaces, and the need for specific support for people who are unable to return to work where that is not possible.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) highlighted the importance of a functioning track and trace system, and the vital importance of protection from eviction for private renters. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) highlighted her concerns about job losses in smaller companies and the importance of ongoing vigilance in our communities while coronavirus is still there. Finally, the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) highlighted the importance of face coverings and the Government's failure of leadership and clarity in that regard.

Labour is taking a constructive approach to the coronavirus response. We recognise that the pandemic presents an unprecedented challenge. We supported the introduction of lockdown and we support its gradual easing. It is in the national interest—vital for saving lives and jobs—for the response to succeed. We want people to be able to return to work safely and to see their families and loved ones again. We want all children to be back at school safely as soon as possible. We welcome some of the measures the Government have introduced to date, some of them in response to the concerns raised by the petitions we are debating.

From the start, however, Labour has been calling for a comprehensive exit strategy; what we have is an exit without a strategy. The petitions we are debating were set up because of concerns stemming from the Government's lack of clarity—the lack of guidance and support for the beauty industry, the lack of engagement with parents, teachers and unions about the reopening of schools, and the great uncertainty on quarantine for weeks ahead of any actual announcement being made.

On the economy, although many of last week's announcements were welcome, the Chancellor's statement missed an opportunity to match up to the scale of the unemployment and economic crisis we face. Families are not staying at home for the want of a tenner off their meal. Many have seen their income decimated, with unprecedented numbers now in food poverty. Many of those who can afford a meal are staying at home, because they are still desperately worried about coronavirus. We do not need piecemeal incentives and soundbites; we need a clear, detailed strategy to give people confidence, and that is entirely in the gift of the Government.

To underpin public confidence, we need a comprehensive and effective test, track and trace system. Test, track and trace is the key to easing lockdown restrictions safely in every single sector of the economy and public services. It is the system that reduces the prevalence of people circulating in the community with coronavirus by identifying those who are at risk before they present with symptoms and requiring them to take a test and stay at home. Whether you work in the beauty industry, a gym or a school, an effective test, track and trace system—along with precautions around PPE, face coverings, hand washing and other hygiene measures, and social distancing—should be providing the confidence that the risks of coronavirus in your workplace are being minimised.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

However, the Government inexplicably stopped test and trace early in the pandemic and have been too slow to reintroduce it. When they did so, they did not invest in additional capacity for public health teams, where much of the effective test and trace work is taking place, but outsourced to Serco, which in turn subcontracted to 29 different individual firms. The result has been chaos, with many tracers reporting working whole shifts without a single call to take. Data protection problems have resulted in local authorities being kept completely in the dark about where new outbreaks were occurring in their communities, and they were powerless to act as a result.

Test, track and trace should be the underpinning of the lockdown exit strategy. Far from the world-beating system that the Prime Minister promised, however, we have been delivered a shambles that is no way near reaching all those with suspected coronavirus. Ministers need to get to grips with the state of the testing regime and be far more open about where the failings are, so that they can be addressed.

In this current phase of the pandemic, there are a number of critical questions the Government must address with urgency, and I hope the Minister will respond to them today. First, there is the question of testing. Will the Government introduce a covid test guarantee that no one will have to wait more than 24 hours to receive a test, or more than 24 hours for test results, without exception and with immediate results? Will the Government deliver a working app that will enable councils to contact everyone at risk, with a cast-iron guarantee about the security of personal information?

Secondly, there is the challenge of local outbreaks. We have seen the first local lockdown in Leicester, and this has already been followed by outbreaks in Blackburn and potentially in Kirklees. It is vital that restrictions are reintroduced whenever there is evidence of increasing transmission of coronavirus, yet current Government policy leaves individuals and businesses penalised for doing the right thing. There is no commitment to location-specific income protection measures for employees going forward, either via the furlough scheme or for self-employed people. There is no guarantee that those who work with vulnerable people will not have to choose between the safety of those they care for and their ability to put food on the table at home. There is no commitment to private renters that they will not face eviction because they are unable to earn income due to coronavirus in their local area. How does the Minister expect local lockdowns to be implemented and sustained without Government support to mitigate the consequences? Does she know whether and when the Government plan to announce any such support?

Thirdly, there is the question of differential impacts of coronavirus on different sectors of the economy. Recent announcements on the creative industries and hospitality are welcome, but what of the transport and aviation sectors, retail and our high streets, where redundancies are being



announced in their thousands? How does the Minister justify a blanket stamp duty cut, which will only drive up high prices? The same money could be targeted to support industries where job losses are highest and where recovery is likely to be slowest, and to support the forgotten 3 million people who are currently not receiving any support with income from the Government.

The debate today has illustrated very powerfully the gaps in the Government's current approach and the certainty that employers and individuals need to begin the process of rebuilding our economy. The Government must now stop their reactive, piecemeal approach and deliver a comprehensive exit strategy based on a comprehensive and effective test, track and trace system, sector-specific support and flexible place-specific support to contain localised outbreaks.

Q19 **Chair:** Thank you. I call the Minister to respond for the Government.

Chloe Smith [V]: Thank you, Chair, and I trust that you can hear me. May I say how important it is to see the Petitions Committee having its first hybrid debate? I congratulate you and everyone involved on achieving that. I thank the Committee for choosing this important subject and all Members for their contributions. I will do my best to respond to Back-Bench contributions during my remarks. I also place on the record my thanks to all members of the public, who are at the heart of any debate of the Petitions Committee. It is excellent to hear the public's voices coming through loud and clear in today's important material.

Coronavirus is one of the biggest challenges that the UK has faced in decades. We are not alone in that. We see the devastating impact of this disease around the world. It has left many thousands of families grieving for loved ones who have, sadly, been taken before their time. As a result of measures that we have put in place, many of which have been unprecedented, and the extreme hard work of the British people, we have been able to bring the spread of the virus under control. We have also been able to ensure that the NHS has not been overwhelmed.

Now, we have to begin to recover and to restore our way of life, in a way that protects not only lives but livelihoods. The Government believe that we are in a position to make life increasingly easier now, so that people may see more of their friends and family, and, as a result of the Chancellor's wide-ranging financial support measures, so that businesses may get back on their feet and people back to work.

I will now talk about some of the matters referred to by hon. Members in the debate, starting with local lockdowns, which were touched on by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), speaking for the Labour party. The Government's recovery plan, published in May, set out how we will make this recovery by moving from a series of national restrictions to a set of more targeted and local measures.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Where any increased local transmission is identified, areas may be required to take additional measures to reduce the spread of the virus, as has happened in Leicester. Public Health England, the Joint Biosecurity Centre, and NHS Test and Trace constantly monitor levels of infection throughout the country and will work with local authorities to implement additional measures, if needed. Such decisions will be taken on a case-by-case basis, and the advice may differ according to the circumstances.

We know that we have to continue to proceed carefully to ensure that there is not a second peak, so the relaxation of all measures would be conditional on our ability to control the virus and to respond effectively to outbreaks. We therefore ask everyone to play their part in that.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Kate Griffiths) and the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for their comments on face coverings, among the other issues they raised. The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) was eloquent about some of the challenges related to those who are shielding, and I will particularly ask my colleague the Minister for disabled people, health and work to respond to some of the points that she made.

The hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) was passionate in her representation of those facing cancer. I will ask the relevant Health Minister to look at her request for a meeting. I will also ask my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to look at the point made by the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) about some studies she mentioned.

Let me turn to the voices we heard from elsewhere around the United Kingdom. I am pleased that, as well as hearing from the hon. Member for Gower, we heard from the hon. Members for Newport West (Ruth Jones), for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), and from others across England as well. That reminds us that it has been important to work throughout this crisis as part of a united UK-wide response.

Public health is a devolved matter in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and those Administrations have rightly adopted measures at different times and in different ways. I pay tribute to all those who have been working across the UK to defeat the virus. I note the benefits of working together, and how all the four nations have been supported and strengthened by the United Kingdom Government. For example, I point to the unprecedented financial support package that the Chancellor was able to provide at the scale of the United Kingdom.

Let me turn to some of the other areas in which we support the public and sectors of the economy to get back to some degree of normality. In education, returning to school is vital to our children's education and for their wellbeing. Our aim is to have all pupils back at school in September, and we have set out guidance to help schools to return in a safe way. For the vast majority of children, the benefits of being back in school far



HOUSE OF COMMONS

outweigh the very low risk to them of coronavirus, and our £1 billion package of support will help primary and secondary school pupils to catch up, which recognises the lost time in education as a result of the pandemic.

Turning to sport, I note at the outset that the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) made a point about the Elite Ice Hockey League, which I shall ask my colleagues in DCMS to follow up. We know how important sport is for wellbeing. That is why the rules on exercise were initially relaxed from 14 May, and the Government have now gone further to ensure that outdoor pools can reopen from 11 July and indoor gym swimming pools and sports facilities can reopen from 25 July, which will be welcome news to millions of people.

Turning to salons, which I know was the subject of one of the other petitions under consideration today, my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) particularly talked through these issues. Beauty salons across England have now been able to reopen. The updated covid secure guidance sets out the measures that those providing close-contact services should follow to protect staff and customers, and the Government have worked with businesses, trade associations and medical experts on the safest way to reopen contact services such as nail bars, and tattoo and massage studios.

We have been clear throughout this crisis that we want as many businesses as possible to open, and we want to help everybody to have confidence that it is safe for them to do so. At this point, I will acknowledge the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) about businesses seeking a clear path ahead and the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), who made points about workers and what they need in their workplaces.

I think hon. Members have not dwelt on it particularly in this debate, but I know that members of the public signed a petition in relation to quarantine. I want to note that, effective from 8 June, rules are in place for entering the UK because of covid-19. Those rules are for residents and visitors. The self-isolation measures that are part of the rules are designed to bring the transmission rate down, stop any new cases being brought in from abroad and, crucially, help to prevent a second wave of coronavirus.

We have recognised, of course, that measures taken, such as this, to limit the spread of covid-19 have a substantial impact both on people's lives and on our economy, such as in the tourism sector. We have judged that that was important to endeavour to save lives, but we have also aimed to continue to support businesses in the tourism sector through one of the most generous economic packages provided anywhere in the world.

Let me draw my remarks to a conclusion, Chair, by saying that I want to thank all other right hon. and hon. Members who spoke today. I know that there are a few who I have not been able to respond to specifically, but I am going to ask colleagues across Government to look at all the points



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that have been raised today and ensure that any further specific points are dealt with by correspondence. I reiterate my thanks to every member of the public who took part today, because it is incredibly important that we hear their voices. I have always welcomed the innovation of the Petitions Committee in being able to do that time after time, and its particular innovation today in doing it in a new way.

In conclusion, defeating coronavirus will take a sustained and collective national effort. While aspects of our lives are returning to near-normal, or a new normal perhaps, we are all in this for the long haul and there are many battles that we need to win before we can say that we have won the war. As we start to recover and return to our way of life, it is vital, of course, that we all stay alert so that we can control the virus to protect lives and livelihoods.

Q20 Chair: Thank you, Minister. I call Chris Evans to sum up the debate.

Chris Evans: Thank you, Chair. I speak as Great Britain registers 45,000 deaths from covid-19. I think that this is the first hybrid debate. It is extremely important that the public know when they put their names to a petition that their voice will be heard, taken seriously and, above all, acted upon by both Government and Parliament. This has been a worthwhile and constructive debate. We have heard Members from all across the UK. I am also pleased that many members of our Committee have taken part in what I believe has been a very successful afternoon. I hope that this is the first of many. What has come out of this debate has been communication.

There has to be recognition by the Government in Westminster that devolution, whether to the nations or regions, is real and functions effectively. Covid-19 does not respect boundaries or borders. Therefore, as well as being clear on what action is being taken, the Government have to have dialogue with the devolved nations and local government, to ensure that there is absolutely no confusion as we move out of lockdown. Simply put, the Government need to speak with one voice.

No aspect of society is unaffected by this disease. I was particularly concerned as I listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) mention cancer treatment during the covid-19 pandemic. It is deeply concerning that those suffering from that terrible disease—I do not think there will be anyone in this room who has not been touched by it—have found that their treatment has been put on the back burner. This is a potential scandal and, morally, we have to do something about it. Equally, we heard passionate speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for West Ham (Ms Brown), for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft).

Everybody who contributed to the debate did so from a position of wanting to make sure that their constituents are heard. Ultimately, we face an uncertain time, and I have to say that the response of the public—whether they are care givers, NHS workers or simply work in a corner shop—has been absolutely exemplary and an example to us all. I believe that, if we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

continue in that spirit, we will beat this terrible disease that has been visited upon us.

Chair: Thank you, Chris, for both opening and closing the debate, and thank you to all the Members who contributed for their impressive restraint in keeping to time. I apologise for the only interruption that I made, but because of the restraint of other speakers, it was completely unnecessary; I interrupted at the very moment you were about to thank me, Marion, which I deeply regret.

I thank the petitioners, who inspired the debate and made sure that all these important issues were aired. I thank the Government for sending a Minister to respond, because it is incredibly important that the petitioners get that response. Finally, I thank the broadcasters and *Hansard*, who work incredibly hard behind the scenes to make all this innovative communication and debate possible, and all the staff who have worked very hard to make it possible today.