

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Home Office Preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus), HC 232

Wednesday 29 April 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 29 April 2020.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Janet Daby; Dehenna Davison; Stephen Doughty; Ruth Edwards; Laura Farris; Simon Fell; Adam Holloway; Tim Loughton; Holly Lynch; Stuart C. McDonald.

Questions 315 to 380

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. Priti Patel, Home Secretary, Home Office; Matthew Rycroft CBE, Permanent Secretary, Home Office; and Shona Dunn, Second Permanent Secretary, Home Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Priti Patel, Matthew Rycroft and Shona Dunn.

Q315 Chair: Welcome to this Home Affairs Committee evidence on coronavirus and the Home Office's response to the coronavirus crisis. We welcome the Home Secretary and also the permanent secretary, Matthew Rycroft, and the second permanent secretary, Shona Dunn. Mr Rycroft, we particularly welcome you, as this is your first appearance before our Committee, and we also welcome you to your post.

Before we start, we convey our congratulations to Carrie Symonds and the Prime Minister on the birth of their baby, which is very good news for them.

The issues we want to cover today will be around borders, followed by immigration, followed by law enforcement and domestic abuse, and then some wider issues about where we go from here.

I begin by just thanking you in the Home Office and all of the agencies that you work with, including Border Force, and also police officers across the country, for the immense amount of work that I know everybody is doing as a result of the coronavirus crisis.

Can we start with the first factual questions? Could you tell us how many people are entering the country each day at the moment, Home Secretary?

Priti Patel: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you for this



opportunity. I echo your congratulations to our Prime Minister and to Carrie on the birth of their baby today.

I also very much recognise and thank everybody across law enforcement and across the civil service who have been working on covid coronavirus and all the associated issues, at what has been an incredibly challenging time.

I have been on an operational call this morning with law enforcement and I will come on to that shortly. There are many things that law enforcement are doing, which, quite frankly, should make us all very proud.

You have asked about the numbers of people coming into the country. The latest numbers I have are for the period of 16 to 22 April. Air passenger numbers are significantly down year on year; this is the data that I have. They are down by 99% compared with the same time last year. Maritime passengers are down by 88.7% compared with the same week in 2019, and international rail passengers are down by 94%, and again that is compared with the numbers from last year.

Obviously, it is fair to say that over the last six weeks, just to put some of this into context, clearly the world has locked itself down and passenger numbers have been low. In terms of air passengers, 63.6% of arriving air passengers have been returning British nationals, and of course we must remember that we have had repatriation flights taking place, quite frankly, on a continuous basis, which has obviously led to numbers of people coming into the United Kingdom.

Q316 **Chair:** Thank you. What is the actual number? On 16 April, the Health Secretary said it was 15,000. What is the actual number now?

Priti Patel: The actual number of people coming in, as of Friday 24 April, was 9,906.

Q317 **Chair:** Great. And what is your estimate of the proportion of people arriving at ports and airports with coronavirus?

Priti Patel: We don't have that data, because obviously our overall approach to international travel and checks at the borders has consistently been informed by the scientific and medical advice provided by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies—SAGE—and Public Health England, so there is no testing at the border. That is a cross-Government decision based upon SAGE advice and medical advice and also with the Department for Transport.

I should also add this around people coming into the country. Let's not forget that we do have people coming in driving goods. Obviously, security of food supply, medical supply etc. has been pivotal over the last six weeks and so that is also something that has been factored in, in terms of the number of people coming into the United Kingdom and why they are coming into the UK.

Q318 **Chair:** Sure, but you must have an estimate. Surely you must have some estimate, SAGE must have done an estimate or somebody must have

done an estimate, because you would need that on which to base your policies on whether to ask people to self-isolate or to have quarantine rules at the border. You must have an estimate.

Priti Patel: The fact of the matter is that SAGE work on the numbers, and obviously for them it's the R value—the reproduction value—based on the lack of flow, basically, coming in through the border, because as we have already said, passenger numbers are down at the border.

Notwithstanding that, we have to remember that they have basically said, based on their advice—their advice has been not to bring in any changes in terms of testing or things of that nature, and we are following that advice. Any restrictions that they looked at—we commissioned this several weeks ago. Scientific advice has been very clear that any restrictions or measures would have a negligible impact on the progression of the virus at the border, given the significant reduction of numbers of people arriving. That is basically what SAGE have been basing their advice to Government on.

Q319 **Chair:** But in order to come to that conclusion, they must have an assessment of the proportion of people who have coronavirus. You have flights from New York, where the New York Governor—people have talked about prevalence levels now being around 20%. We have had, through this period, flights of people coming home from Spain or from Italy. You took a decision not to have self-isolation rules at the border in a way that other countries have, but I presume that was based on some sort of figures or estimates about what proportion of people might have the virus.

Priti Patel: My understanding is, from the SAGE advice that has been given to Government, that the estimate was 0.5%, and that has effectively led to the decision, based on the advice that we have had from both SAGE and Public Health England, that no changes would be required.

Q320 **Chair:** Is that 0.5% of passengers arriving at airports?

Priti Patel: That is 0.5% of the total number of people.

Q321 **Chair:** Travelling—the total number of people who—

Priti Patel: Well, that's my understanding—that is my understanding.

Q322 **Chair:** Okay. This just seems the sort of thing that it would be very important to have some accuracy on.

Priti Patel: We will provide that. I am very happy to get that figure for the Committee. My understanding is—in fact, I have just been told that that is based on the exact number of symptomatic. Well, the exact number of symptomatic people is in the low tens, but I will get clarity for the Committee in terms of the actual figure that is used by SAGE, because I think that is what you are asking in your question, and that has therefore been factored into their calculations, with the R factor, that then led to the decision and the advice that they gave to Government not to bring in restrictions or measures.

Q323 **Chair:** Why haven't you published that advice?

Priti Patel: That is not for me to publish, and my understanding is that SAGE will be publishing. They are publishing data and scientific advice, so that will come in due course. I am absolutely clear I have been told that SAGE are publishing data.

Specifically to this, I am sure that advice will be published, but as I have said, I will absolutely get that figure that has been used as part of the equation for the R calculation that then led to, obviously, their decisions, their advice, around public health recommendations. We will get that for you.

Q324 **Chair:** The reason why this is significant is obviously that Germany, New Zealand, South Korea, Italy, Singapore, Australia, Canada, Greece—all these countries ask people who are arriving back in the country, people who are travelling home from all over the world, to self-isolate, maybe for 14 days, and we don't. You have said it's the science, but is our science different from all of theirs?

Priti Patel: These are questions absolutely for SAGE, but there are some fundamental points that we must all recognise and note here. Every other country has been at a different stage in terms of the virus and the peaks in their own country. SAGE and our scientific advisers can only base their recommendations to Ministers and Government on the data that they have at a particular time.

We are going back, obviously, to the end of March period, when that advice was commissioned and provided to Ministers. It might be worth noting that, even if you look at a country such as Italy, which took very restrictive measures, it did not necessarily stop the spread of the virus. Every country has been at different stages. Every country takes different scientific advice, and they have to make their own judgments accordingly. Much of the advice will be forthcoming, as SAGE will be publishing that and some of the data that has helped to inform their positions and decisions.

Q325 **Chair:** The countries that I listed—Germany, New Zealand, Italy, Singapore and South Korea—are all in very different positions. Some of them have been ahead of us and some of them have been behind us, but all those countries have policies around self-isolation—simply asking people who come into the country to self-isolate for a period. They have been travelling by plane and have come from an area of high risk.

According to some of the evidence, 130 countries have more restrictions than we do. Professor Gabriel Scally, who is the president of epidemiology and public health at the Royal Society of Medicine, has said: "The UK is an outlier...It is most peculiar...Travel restriction by itself is of course not going to do the job. But all of these things are additive. It all adds up to beating the virus."

The problem with simply saying, "Oh well, it is all for SAGE," and then not publishing the SAGE evidence is that, in the end, you are the Home Secretary taking these really important decisions. Surely you have a



responsibility to put this information into the public domain regardless of what SAGE say, because this is crucial evidence to substantiate the important decisions that you are making as a Minister.

Priti Patel: First of all, all decisions are made at a cross-Government level, which is exactly what we have been doing as Ministers across the whole of Government. This isn't about the effort of one Government Department; these decisions are made collectively.

Let me just remind the Committee and be very clear about the scientific advice on isolating incoming travellers. The science has been clear. SAGE have been clear to us, as have Public Health England, that this would have a negligible effect on the progression of the virus in the UK. They base that on the significantly reduced numbers of passengers arriving into the country, and on the relatively high levels of transmission of the disease in the UK.

However, with any decision on any policy around coronavirus, everything is under review. We review decisions with SAGE. SAGE met yesterday and will meet again later in the week—I think it will be tomorrow. Everything is under review, based on the most appropriate response to the changing situation in relation to covid-19. Of course, that comes back to the R factor as well—

Q326 **Chair:** Sorry to interrupt, but doesn't it worry you that all of these other countries clearly have different science from the advice you have been given? Have you asked other countries what science they are looking at, just to double check that you are getting the decision right?

Priti Patel: Of course we work with our international partners, and that is actually an important point to make here.

Q327 **Chair:** You haven't asked for their evidence and their science?

Priti Patel: I speak to my counterparts, particularly in Europe, frequently.

Q328 **Chair:** Have you looked at their particular science and guidance— their assessment of why they think it prevents the virus spreading faster by having these self-isolation rules in place? Have you asked Germany, South Korea and so forth about what figures and science they are looking at to make these decisions?

Priti Patel: First of all, we are not similar to many of those other countries—we should be very clear about that—in terms of traveller and passenger flows. It is a fact that the UK has among the largest number of international arrivals—very different flows from those of some of the countries that have been mentioned. That is obviously a key consideration of SAGE. Key to that is how we work with SAGE, and we have been working with SAGE.

This is a cross-Government effort. We make these decisions collectively. This isn't just for one Department in isolation to single-handedly say, "We are going to do X." This information is calibrated across Government with SAGE, but also with other Government Departments. We have been

compared internationally. Looking at some of the charts that are shared on a daily basis through the Government press conferences and the way data is calibrated, we are compared internationally. But the fact of the matter is that we work with SAGE and Public Health England. This is advice that we are taking from them.

Q329 **Chair:** When will that be published?

Priti Patel: I have already said that it will be published. I can't give you a specific date, but I am very happy to get you a specific date if that is what you would like.

Chair: That would be really helpful because we have been asking for this information and analysis for a long time.

Q330 **Ruth Edwards:** Thank you very much, Home Secretary, for making yourself available at such a busy time for your Department. I want to continue on the issue of border controls, because it is probably one of the issues that has come up most in my inbox. Constituents really are very concerned. I completely support basing our policy on scientific advice, but when it seems to run so counter-intuitively to what people perceive, it is really important that that advice is published and made available to them, so I welcome the commitment that it will be.

I want to ask about comments from the deputy chief medical officer Jonathan Van-Tam, who said that the risk of infection from overseas arrivals remains minuscule at the moment relative to in-country infection. But he did add that screening at airports might become an option once the overall in-country infection rate had dropped. How will that risk be determined, and under what criteria would quarantining arrivals become an approach that you might consider?

Priti Patel: First, those comments were made a few weeks ago, and of course they were based on the SAGE evidence and medical advice that I have referred to. Today is the first time I have heard the request from the Committee to publish it, so we will follow that up through our perm secretaries.

It is important to recognise, notwithstanding public perception, the point about not screening passengers on arrival. We have had low passenger numbers, and that simply is not making a material impact. There have also been queries and questions among the medical and scientific community about the value of thermal screening and whether it will identify or give false positives. There are a range of issues around that. Also, it is easy to circumvent by taking fever-suppressing drugs: paracetamol and things of that nature.

You have specifically asked under what circumstances would measures at the border such as quarantining apply and then come in. First, it would still be based on the science. It would also be based on any changes outside this country. For example, as easements to lockdown take place in other countries and more people perhaps choose to travel and to fly, we still—rightly—have to think about the impact of a second wave.

We have gone through a great deal of grief and hardship in our country. The public response has been absolutely extraordinary in its support for staying at home and listening to the advice of the medical and scientific advisers and Public Health England as to why we need to protect the NHS by not overwhelming it. Of course, that would be a crucial component of this, along with, as the Government has outlined already, the five tests: making sure that we can continue to protect the NHS, that there is a sustained and consistent fall in the daily death rate, and showing that the infection rate is decreasing. Showing that it is decreasing domestically obviously means that we want to prevent that second wave. So this is under discussion. I can confirm that.

I mentioned earlier that we are reviewing everything. We have to do that. It is the right and responsible thing to do. We are reviewing the science, obviously. The science from three weeks ago can differ from two weeks later. Let us not forget that even in the data that does come forward, on issues such as the daily death rate and the impact of the virus across the country, there is a lag in some of that data coming through as well, so we have to work with the scientists, work with the data, and also look at the operational side of things.

This isn't something that could just come in overnight. We will have to look at the practical measures of this: how it would be delivered, which ports of entry first and foremost, and how that would work on a practical basis. We rule nothing out at all, and it is right and responsible that we keep these measures under review.

Q331 Ruth Edwards: Are you preparing some of your key teams such as the Border Force in case they have to enforce quarantine at the border in future?

Priti Patel: Absolutely. Border Force have been part of this active discussion over several weeks. Let me be very clear: this is not something that has manifested itself overnight. I commissioned the discussion six weeks ago in Government. This has been an active discussion. I led the discussion with Border Force across Government, with the Cabinet Office in particular, so this is not just the Home Office on its own. This is a cross-Government discussion, led by the Cabinet Office, with the Department for Transport.

The Department for Transport are working with us on this, and have been over the past six weeks, as have the Department of Health and Social Care, because we work to the PHE guidance and to the medical and scientific advice. Of course, they have clear views on this as well.

As ever with the efficacy of whatever decisions are made, and how that is published going forward and how that is operationalised, we have to base our decisions not just on personal preferences or anything of that nature but on sound facts and sound science, and what this actually means with flows of numbers coming in. It is not just airports, by the way; it is ports.

Q332 Ruth Edwards: Of course. This is the final question from me. You



mentioned how fantastic the public response is, and I agree, but in order to enforce social distancing and to make sure that people are staying at home and protecting the NHS we need public consent. As you say, we have a huge amount of grief and hardship in our country at the moment.

I appreciate that passenger numbers have declined by a huge amount, but given that you need only a small handful of people coming into the country with the virus to restart another outbreak do you think that there is a danger that, if we do not properly explain to the public why we are keeping the borders open, and if we do not bring in—or consider more carefully bringing in—quarantine measures, we may lose public consent? People will ask, “Why am I having to stay at home, unable to see my grandchildren and the people I love, when we have people arriving from coronavirus hotspots every day with no quarantine measures placed on them at all?”

Priti Patel: I will bring in Shona Dunn shortly, because obviously she oversees some of the borders work. First of all, March seems like a long time ago. We are at the end of April now and so much has happened. I think the British public have been incredible in terms of their spirit of national unity and the way in which they have taken personal responsibility.

When this first started—it was not just at the end of March; if we recall, it was going back into February—we asked people coming back from Italy in February and March to self-isolate, and we found places for travellers to self-isolate and effectively we then quarantined, but when community transmission accelerated at quite a rate the need was much bigger.

The point is that now, as you have highlighted, we are heading into a different phase of this virus, and with that different phase different measures will inevitably come in. We should also emphasise, to come back to the point that I made earlier to the Chair, that the largest group of nationals arriving in the UK have been British citizens and other resident nationals—people travelling back as measures were closing down, particularly towards that end-of March period.

As I have said, all of this is under review. Shona might want to elaborate on some of the measures that could come in, and how we would operationalise that. This comes back to the practical ways in which we operationalise and then communicate that both to the public and, internationally, to people who may be looking to come into our country, and under what auspices they will be coming into the country.

One of the key points that I have made is that we focused on the repatriation of British nationals, but we also focused on keeping ports open, to keep goods flowing in particular. Seven weeks ago, we were seeing panic buying and our supermarket shelves were clearing out pretty rapidly. If you look at what has happened since, we have kept the supply of goods and medicines coming through. There will have to be communications around this. I am sure that Shona can speak about some



of the border management as well, and some of the work that we have been doing.

Shona Dunn: Thank you, Home Secretary. Just to clarify one point that came up earlier in the session, Chair, the 0.5% figure from 23 March was essentially 0.5% of total cases at the time in the country. I think that was the conclusion of SAGE.

Q333 **Chair:** So does that mean it was a much higher proportion than of the number of people entering the country?

Shona Dunn: I do not have the figure for the proportion coming into the country—we would be able to work that out—but just to clarify, that was the point at the time.

Q334 **Chair:** That is actually quite curious. I do not understand why the Home Office does not know what that figure is—what that proportion or estimate is—for the number of people coming through our ports and airports, a lot of whom will be coming home, as the Home Secretary has said, being repatriated and so on. What proportion of them might have coronavirus? Why do you not have that figure? Why have you not been testing and shaking that figure continually as part of your decision-making?

Shona Dunn: Obviously that 0.5% figure was at 23 March. The numbers coming into the country post that period have gone down significantly. The numbers coming into the country at that point were higher and they will keep moving—

Q335 **Chair:** I understand, but I am still asking a factual question about your estimate of the proportion of people entering the country who may have coronavirus. I do not understand why you do not have that figure.

Shona Dunn: We do not have an estimate of that figure. Our chief scientific adviser is very heavily involved in the work with SAGE. We do not have an estimate of that figure. The point remains, as the Home Secretary has said, that we have been working to advice provided by SAGE that this has a negligible effect on overall transmission in country. We have been working very much to the guidance provided by SAGE, and the Government guidance, on when to test—

Q336 **Chair:** That 0.5% is what in absolute terms? In total numbers terms, what does that translate into?

Shona Dunn: I do not have the figure. Obviously, that was 0.5% of the total cases in the country on 23 March. I do not have that figure as a number. I can get you that figure as a number. It is not a figure that the Home Office has generated and I do not have it in front of me, but I am more than happy to get it to you. It would of course be the figure at that point in time on 23 March, and things have moved significantly since then.

Q337 **Chair:** What would be really helpful is to know what the figure was at that time, what the figure was previously when you took the decision about the policy, and also what the latest figure is, in absolute number terms,



because obviously, a very small proportion of a very large number could still be a lot of people. We cannot tell from what you are saying whether we are talking about small numbers of people or large numbers of people.

Shona Dunn: I am more than happy to see if those numbers are available, Chair, and to get them to you if they are.

Chair: Thank you.

Shona Dunn: To come back to the point that the Home Secretary raised with respect to measures at the border, as she said, Border Force has been heavily involved in ongoing conversations, as you would expect, across Government on the measures that could be put in place. As the Home Secretary has said, there are a number of those measures where there are potentially significant downsides. There are some measures that, at particular points in time, depending on appropriate triggers being reached, it might be sensible to bring in. That is a very active discussion.

Border Force are engaged, as the Home Secretary said, with DHSC and DfT on a whole variety of different dimensions associated with that, including, for example, what information Border Force officers may have to take at the border, what the operational requirements on them would be to be able to do that, and what they might have to ask people to do once they have left ports of entry. There are also questions around, for example, the sort of exemptions that you might need. We have also been thinking carefully about how that might progress over time.

So Border Force are involved. All their technical experts and operational experts are involved in that process. A critical factor for Border Force, on behalf of the Government, has been keeping borders open for those things that we need to keep coming in.

Q338 **Stephen Doughty:** I am confused, Home Secretary. What were the decisions based on before 23 March? Were you sampling international travellers coming into the UK in terms of them having coronavirus symptoms or subsequently developing them?

Priti Patel: I have already said that there was no testing at all that was coming through. Previously, before that date, if you recall, there were flights coming in from certain parts of the world, just as the virus was really gripping the world in other countries, before we had become submerged by covid in that sense. We were quarantining individuals—people who were travelling.

We were quarantining individuals—people who were travelling. I can't recall the locations they were coming in from, but there were certain parts of the world that travellers were coming in from and were being quarantined. As you will recall, that was prior to the lockdown, and if memory serves me correct, I think that was sometime in late February.

Q339 **Stephen Doughty:** Home Secretary, I am surprised that you cannot recall where they were being quarantined from, given that you are



responsible for the border. They were being quarantined from Wuhan, but they weren't being quarantined from northern Italy, New York, Madrid and many, many other locations. Why was that the case? Why was only Wuhan being quarantined, but not some of the other high-prevalence areas?

Priti Patel: If you recall, at the time the focus was on Wuhan, and of course we were bringing back British nationals who had been in Wuhan through many of the repatriation flights that were taking place. That was the focus. There is a timeline of activity, in terms of the disease, where it was emerging from and the categories of countries, in particular—the hotspots at the time.

Q340 **Stephen Doughty:** But, Home Secretary, the hotspots were already in northern Italy, with substantial numbers dying and infected, and Madrid. Obviously 3,000 Atletico Madrid fans came in on 11 March, I think, for the match with Liverpool. There were many, many other instances of high-prevalence areas. Who took the decision that flights only from Wuhan were to be quarantined, but not from some of these other key prevalence locations?

Priti Patel: At the time—let us be clear—Wuhan was obviously in the spotlight, and the Foreign Office in particular were working night and day in terms of bringing back British nationals from those particular countries. We were also seeing that graduated decline in passenger numbers. Much of the decision—I have already mentioned SAGE—was based on Public Health England advice that came in to Government at that particular time, and of course, we have been following the advice that has come from PHE.

Q341 **Stephen Doughty:** Home Secretary, I think the public will find that very difficult to understand. I have a selection of comments here from people who were travelling from northern Italy in early March.

One person said, "A friend has had family return from Italy today and confirmed no checks on landing at Heathrow...It's like our government don't care or have any plan of action". Another said, "I've just landed back from Italy at Heathrow. No thermal imaging, no info on Covid-19; just a bit of hand sanitizer if you fancied it!" Other people are finding it absolutely extraordinary.

I think common sense would dictate this. Why were we not quarantining or checking individuals coming from other locations where there were substantial outbreaks in March, let alone February or January?

Priti Patel: If you recall, at the time, people were asked to self-isolate, particularly from Italy. There was advice going round and that was very much the case.

Q342 **Stephen Doughty:** So why did you change that advice on 13 March, Home Secretary?

Priti Patel: As I have said, all advice is based upon SAGE and Public Health England. That is a cross-Government decision that is taken through

cross-Government decisions and Cabinet Committees at that particular time.

Q343 **Stephen Doughty:** Did you disagree with that advice, Home Secretary?

Priti Patel: We all follow the advice that is given from the Government.

Q344 **Stephen Doughty:** That is not what I asked you. Did you agree with it, Home Secretary?

Priti Patel: I have been very clear that I have been, from the outset, commissioning the advice and raising issues around borders and border security. It is not about me disagreeing at all. We work, and we have consistently shown—I think this is the most important thing; it is important as well for the public to recognise that it is not just on the borders, but that it applies to every single aspect of the operational support for the British public, but also for our country, in terms of stopping the spread of the virus and protecting our people and the NHS—that it has been based on SAGE and Public Health England advice. We have been following that—

Q345 **Stephen Doughty:** That sounds like you are not quite answering the question. Obviously, there will be, I am sure, a full public inquiry into this in due course. Can you just tell me this? Did you personally, at any point from 1 January to 23 March, recommend closing or restricting the border, or formally instituting quarantine on flights other than from Wuhan—yes or no?

Priti Patel: First of all, let me just say that when it comes to the advice on quarantine and self-isolating in particular, the advice is clear: if you are symptomatic, you need to stay at home. That applies to absolutely everybody, and that is also people travelling.

Q346 **Stephen Doughty:** But you changed that advice, Home Secretary.

Priti Patel: That is for people travelling into the United Kingdom as well. Secondly, I have obviously commissioned advice, and rightly so, around border measures. Those border measures have been constantly under review.

At the time, I think it was sensible and responsible to query all aspects, in terms of protecting our citizens so that the NHS would not be overwhelmed and to make sure that we have looked at every single aspect. In fact, in the Home Office, our own scientific adviser, who is part of SAGE, has been part of those discussions in central Government. We have been following that advice.

Q347 **Stephen Doughty:** Last question, Home Secretary. On 13 March the chief scientific officer, Sir Patrick Vallance, made his comments—infamous comments—about herd immunity. Was the decision on 13 March linked to that, and were you effectively overruled by the Prime Minister and others at the time, against your best judgment?

Priti Patel: No, absolutely not. I absolutely will say, having commissioned the advice—and, as I have said, that advice has been constantly under



review, and rightly so—we based that on the scientific and medical advice. That is absolutely clear, and everything that the Government has been doing—yes, in terms of actions not just on the borders but other aspects, in terms of preventing the spread of the virus and protecting the NHS—has been based on SAGE advice; so the two are not linked at all.

Q348 Stephen Doughty: I think a lot of members of the public will find this absolutely baffling—that you are allowing individuals to come in without any testing, checks, or even imposing, formally, the quarantine requirements on anywhere other than Wuhan. I think it would be really helpful, Home Secretary, if you could give us a detailed list of locations which flights, from the start of the year, were quarantined from formally. Was it just Wuhan, or were there other locations? I think it would be really useful to have a formal list of where these took place.

Priti Patel: Of course. We will absolutely provide that, but I will say again that all decisions around borders, and ongoing discussions around borders—because this hasn't been a binary discussion at all; this is constantly being under review—has been based absolutely, yes, on the fact that passenger flows have completely fallen through the floor quite literally. And we are seeing that from the industry, airlines—*[Inaudible]*—etc.

Stephen Doughty: But they hadn't before.

Priti Patel: But of course there was a pattern—a change in pattern—as the world was locking down; but it has been based on scientific and medical evidence and advice provided by SAGE and Public Health England, and of course we will be sharing that going forward.

Q349 Tim Loughton: Home Secretary, we have spent rather a lot of this session talking about people arriving legitimately at ports of entry. May I briefly raise the issue of those arriving illegally, or those apprehended by Border Force and others in the channel, and the apparent spike that there has been during the lockdown—over 1,000 people who have made land in the UK; and they are just the ones we know about.

Has something changed in France? Have you had discussions with your French counterpart? Have they relaxed their activity trying to prevent people getting in the water in the first place? Because a lot of people, particularly in the south of England—in my constituency—feel very aggrieved that people arriving are apparently not even being asked, then, to go into quarantine, and not being taken back to France.

Priti Patel: First of all, you are absolutely right to highlight this. This has been a very difficult area, and a very challenging area. Illegal migration continues to be a very, very difficult and problematic area for us; that is just a fact. You specifically asked about France and, if I can put this into context, this isn't just about France; this is our wider near borders. Belgium is also part of this flow of illegal migration that has been taking place over a number of years now; but patterns are changing. You have rightly highlighted what we would describe as small boats—rubber dinghies. The pattern has changed much more to that particular mode—to

boats—primarily because so many of the other routes have been closed down.

May I take you back to last October, when the awful, awful tragedy happened in Purfleet, with the 39 deaths of Vietnamese people—migrants that came over to the country. We absolutely upscaped border security; but, actually, the opening up of lorries: I have seen this myself. I have been on shifts around with Border Force where refrigerated lorries are not just being scanned; they are opened up. That trickles through. That goes back, obviously, to the traffickers, the organised traffickers, the individuals that are facilitating this abhorrent crime—and it is a crime; and they are using different methodologies, so we have seen greater dispersal across the French coast, and we are seeing this now across the Belgian coast.

What has happened in France—all credit to the French, actually, who, like we are, despite lockdown and despite all the pressures with coronavirus, are deploying all sorts of activity and resources, basically in trying to deter: so there is now 24/7 coverage on the beaches of northern France. We are using drones; we are using more detections; we are using ANPR.

The fact of the matter is, notwithstanding these French patrols—these extra patrols on French beaches and using specialist vehicles and detection equipment—too many are getting through. What we are seeing, though, although the numbers are higher, of those getting through—there are extraordinary numbers; and we do have statistics. I cannot share them all with you, because there are currently more than 20 live investigations into organised immigration criminality involving gangs and facilitators, but we are convicting people.

I understand that, in the last year alone, we have convicted and imprisoned more than 111 people smugglers, and there have been more than 1,000 incidences of disruption. There is a lot more detail behind every single case, which you rightly highlight. We now have the NCA, and we have Border Force officers in France. More work is taking place on immigration enforcement. There is a whole range of activity.

Q350 Tim Loughton: Home Secretary, we do not have much time. I understand absolutely that that includes Belgium, and that there has been displacement. Obviously, there are fewer stowaways on trucks, because fewer trucks are coming through. Reassuringly, there was some good progress last year of French patrols picking up people in French territorial waters and returning them to France; it was not only a case of the British picking them up and bringing them to the UK. I am concerned—has that activity eased off, because the French have taken their eye off the ball or have other priorities at the moment?

Priti Patel: No.

Q351 Tim Loughton: Are you satisfied that the French are doing as much as they can, in collaboration with our security forces? Can we get to an agreement, which I think we were trying to get, where we could return illegal migrants who are picked up in British territorial waters to France or



Belgium—from whence they came—which I think most people would see as justified?

Priti Patel: That is absolutely right. This is not perfect at all, and there is more that we are doing on this. In the last week, I have actually been in touch with my French counterpart to discuss what more we can do. We have put forward a proposition of new measures. You're very welcome to come in—I gave an open invitation to the entire Committee—*[Inaudible]*.

It is probably not appropriate to discuss some of the things, because of the criminality associated with this, and because this also involves French law enforcement. A lot of work is taking place. We have put forward some measures—we are doing this directly through our embassy in Paris, and I am doing it directly with my counterpart in France—around returns, and returns at sea, which is exactly the point that you make.

We will go further than that as well, very much looking at—not only in the Home Office but with the MoJ; this is a UK policy area—some of the vexatious methods that are being used, and some of the vexatious claims around illegal immigration and asylum that come forward with many of these illegal migrant activities. I think the Committee would welcome a briefing on that. I know you were denied the chance to come in, but it is an open invitation, and I very much hope that you take it up, as a Committee.

Tim Loughton: Thank you.

Priti Patel: *[Inaudible]* Having discussed it, you can be sighted on the law enforcement work and some of the very diplomatic discussions that are taking place in this space.

Q352 **Chair:** Home Secretary, I think the Clerks have in fact been in touch with the Home Office over several weeks to try to get this private briefing session fixed. I really hope that the Home Office can arrange it, because we have certainly been trying to do so.

We need to move on to immigration next. However, for clarity, you said that it was the first that you had heard of us requesting the science behind these decisions. We did in fact ask for that as part of the letter that I sent you on 3 April, which specifically asked for it, and we have also chased that since.

We still do not have an explanation from you on why our decisions around self-isolation at the borders are so different from other countries'. The only reasons you have so far given for why we might be different are, first, because we have more international travellers, and secondly, that we might not need self-isolation because we have so few international travellers, and thirdly, you told us that you are simply following the SAGE advice, which we simply have not seen.

I urge you to provide us with that information and advice as rapidly as possible, and also to interrogate it yourself, because it is quite troubling that the Home Office itself does not seem to have questioned, quizzed or



challenged any of the advice, data or information that you have been given. You mention immigration visas—

Priti Patel: Let me just say that, first of all, we will absolutely provide that to you. It is wrong to characterise the Home Office as having not been probing. We work with our scientific adviser in the Department, who is directly represented on SAGE. We will get that information to you.

To your point about Home Office briefings, let me put on the record that we have had an open invitation to all members of the Committee, and that was declined, so I am restating that invitation again, to all Committee members. I am sure that we will not just fix up days; I did put an invitation in based on thematic discussions. We would welcome open dialogue and discussion, in the same way that I have been having open dialogue and discussion with the shadow Home Secretary and Opposition parties throughout this coronavirus crisis.

Q353 **Chair:** On that basis, it would appear that we should be able to agree to have such a private briefing on Tuesday of next week.

Priti Patel: I am sure we can fix that up.

Q354 **Chair:** We have repeatedly said that we would like a private briefing. We did not want one instead of a public briefing—we are very keen to have you here today—but we have also always said that we would like a private briefing. We have struggled to get the Home Office to give us a date to do so.

Priti Patel: We will organise several private briefings for you.

Q355 **Janet Daby:** Good morning, Home Secretary. The Government have announced that national health service frontline workers and care workers will have their visas extended. There has been no statutory instrument and no written notice to that effect. What is the current legal basis for the extension?

Priti Patel: First of all, as you will be aware, in March earlier on this year, I announced an automatic visa extension for NHS doctors, nurses and paramedics—those individuals whose visa expired before 1 October this year. Clearly, that is going to make an enormous difference to individuals—around 3,000 frontline healthcare workers and their families.

You specifically ask about the statutory instrument and the legal basis. Of course, as Home Secretary, I am able to exercise discretion to extend immigration leave in exceptional circumstances, and I think we can all agree that these are exceptional circumstances.

We are working with NHS trusts in particular now to identify those who are working in the NHS in the relevant roles and providing the support required. That is something that the Home Office is doing directly with NHS trusts and with UKVI. This visa extension will benefit many nurses, social workers, therapists and people who are working across the NHS, whose visas were due to expire before 1 October this year.

Q356 **Janet Daby:** Will the extension go beyond tier 2 workers?

Priti Patel: Currently, right now, I have been very clear—recognising the NHS—that this is specifically for those individuals who have travelled to the UK, with tier 2 visas in particular. There are many others, as you will know, that work in the NHS that are not in tier 2—for example, EU workers who work in all parts of the NHS and in the care sector are already covered here with the right to remain under the EU settlement scheme.

Everything that we are doing in this space right now is done in conjunction with the Department of Health and Social Care. They obviously understand the pressures and also the characteristics of people who are employed in the NHS across different NHS trusts, so we are working with them to identify individuals who we can assist through this method, through visas, and to be as thoroughly supportive as we possibly can, through the workforce plan that the NHS has with the Department of Health and Social Care.

Q357 **Janet Daby:** So at the moment, it doesn't go beyond tier 2 workers, and you are looking to identify who else this would apply to. Is that correct?

Priti Patel: Importantly, we are looking to identify, with NHS trusts and the Department of Health and Social Care, who else this will apply to. That is absolutely right because there will be many others who just do not have tier 2 visas. Trying to identify that is difficult—it is not easy to identify individuals, particularly because they will be here providing different skills and did not necessarily come to the UK through the tier 2 route.

Q358 **Janet Daby:** Where can people find this information? Where will it be?

Priti Patel: First of all, all our information that is specific to coronavirus and the changes that we as a Department have made around visas and visa extension is available through gov.uk.

We are doing this specifically through the NHS—through NHS trusts, working with the Department of Health and Social Care. Trusts have information in terms of who has tier 2 visas. That communication route is absolutely crucial, it really is. We are doing what we can at that macro level, at the national Government level through the centre, but obviously much of this is now being cascaded through NHS trusts around the United Kingdom.

Janet Daby: Thank you.

Q359 **Holly Lynch:** Thank you, Home Secretary. Further to the question that was just asked, beyond those working in the NHS and social care, there are a whole raft of visa issues that have been brought to the fore by the coronavirus. What clarity is the Home Office offering to those people who have visas that are due to run out or expire, or that require renewal, and who are unable to do that or to leave the country because of the coronavirus, to avoid absolute chaos for them?

Priti Patel: First of all—perhaps I will bring in Shona Dunn on this, because we can talk about our visa operations in particular—throughout coronavirus, visa operations have clearly changed, but in terms of clarity, much of the information has gone out through our VACs system through UKVI. That, as you would expect, is the normal approach, but we are still providing support to people who need emergency support on visas and where individual cases are raised.

At the end of the day, the Home Office is very much a caseworking Department, so, knowing the individuals who need help and support, there is a whole triaging process taking place to ensure through UKVI that people are given the support they need.

In some instances, that is about getting back into the country—let's not forget where we were towards the end of March, when other countries were locking down and there were people of different nationalities in this country who wanted to get back home, and it was about providing them the support that they need.

Likewise, there were British nationals who resided abroad who wanted to come back home, and that is not just through the repatriation flights and the support of Border Force; there is a lot of UKVI work there. I will ask Shona to speak about how UKVI operations are functioning right now and the type of work that is taking place, and she can elaborate on that for you.

Shona Dunn: Thank you, Home Secretary. Just to add to the Home Secretary's point about how it is being communicated, as well as communications on gov.uk and out through our network, there is also a dedicated covid-19 helpline that has been available since mid-February. There are 200 staff working that helpline, and they have dealt with around 50,000 email inquiries and around 25,000 phone inquiries.

We are doing everything we possibly can—as the Home Secretary says, we are an operational Department first and foremost—to ensure we are providing that information to people who, as you say, will have very varying circumstances to deal with and will need support with that.

To come to the Home Secretary's point about the work that we have been focusing on, again, this is a changing picture, and it changes week by week as we put ourselves in the position to be best able to continue as much of our work as possible. We have, in the first instance, been focusing on those types of casework activity that are urgent, exceptional or compassionate, and those associated with the most vulnerable.

For example, since the lockdown began, we have handled around 600 emergency and compassionate passport application cases. We have handled a significant number of visa requests for essential travel and for status purposes. We have also ensured that, as far as possible, we have kept our services available for priority areas such as, for example, the Windrush compensation scheme and EUSS applications. There are a



variety of ways in which we are endeavouring to ensure that those who are most concerned or most at risk are still being serviced by our folk.

Q360 Holly Lynch: Thank you for that. Before moving to the EUSS, can I just ask in addition to that about those with minimum income requirements attached to their visa status? If they find themselves in a position where they have been unable to work due to the coronavirus or they have a reduced income because they have been furloughed, for example, is the Home Office working with them to give them clarity that they will not be at a disadvantage for those reasons that were outside their control?

Shona Dunn: The Home Secretary has been very clear that any individual who finds themselves affected by circumstances outside of their control will not be disadvantaged by that. I can absolutely confirm that the Home Office will work with those individuals to make sure we are supporting them through that process.

There are a number of different ways in which people can meet that requirement beyond their salary, but beyond that and recognising the point that it is important we do not disadvantage people for things they cannot control, we will absolutely work flexibly with people in those circumstances.

Q361 Holly Lynch: On the process with the EU settlement scheme, given that the settlement resolution centres have closed their phone lines, a number of pop-up events around awareness have had to be postponed and the centres for scanning documents have been closed, is the Home Secretary minded to consider extending the deadline, which is a very clear window of opportunity that people have to apply for EU settled status?

Priti Patel: First of all, the EUSS has been a great success. Since 30 March 2019, more than 3.4 million applications have been received and over 3.1 million have been granted status. There is still over a year yet to apply before the deadline, which is of course 30 June 2021.

It is important to recognise as well that throughout this pandemic, there has continued to be a wide range of support—support has not stopped. Let me be really clear about that: support has not stopped at all. Support is still available online, by telephone and by email for those who have questions and need help, and we are still receiving approximately 2,000 applications every single day. That is a testament to the ways of working around this, and the fact that communication avenues are open.

We are still providing support; we are absolutely there providing support, and even over a set period of time since 20 March to the end of 19 April, over 20,000 emails have been received. We are carrying on. At this stage, to answer your question, we see no reason to extend the deadline when there is still over a year to apply.

Q362 Holly Lynch: My final point, Chair, is that given the nature and the legacy of the hostile environment, with all these visa issues, there are so many people here legally now who feel in a very precarious situation, without absolute clarity and legal underpinning about what their status and their



ability to be in the UK is at this moment.

In the letter that the Home Office sent to the Committee dated 14 April, it was unable to provide any further clarity about the length of time to process an application under the EUSS, other than to say 41% of applications were processed in more than 14 days. We can also see within that letter that 65% of administrative reviews on rejected applications resulted in the original decision being overturned. With some of these additional barriers now in place because of the coronavirus, would you not accept that absolute clarity is required for people with a whole raft of visa issues, and that extension may be something that the Government have to consider in relation to the EUSS?

Priti Patel: First of all, I do not. The reason for that is primarily because we should separate the EU settlement scheme from wider visa issues; we should not conflate the two whatsoever. I am very happy for part of the briefings next week to demonstrate the processes that go around the EUSS—I think that would be of great interest, actually—and how the decision-making process is actually undertaken, and then perhaps pick up on other visa issues. Visas are complicated, as you know, and that is why we have to separate the two very clearly.

However, you rightly mentioned the point about legal status for individuals. Given what has happened in the past—if we get time to talk about Wendy Williams’s independent review of Windrush, I am very happy to do so—there is an absolute litany of historic issues that we as a Department need to address, and we will be addressing them.

Let me tell you that quite clearly: no stone will be unturned here, and I have been very clear about that, specifically relating to the lessons learned review. I do want to put this within the context of some of the historical activity that has taken place, yes, around decision making, but also around cases and how people have been treated. That is something that we are determined and adamant—I cannot say it stronger than that—to change, because people have been treated appallingly in the past, in very different circumstance. That is why I don’t want to conflate the EUSS with this; these are two separate issues.

But, rightly, we should absolutely have a discussion, if not today, then another time—next week in the briefing—about some of these wider contextual issues around how people feel, around how they have been treated, and around visas, status and the overall handling in terms of casework.

Chair: Home Secretary, we are running tight for time now. We have some more questions to put to you on immigration and detention, but Simon Fell has to log on to Zoom for Prime Minister’s questions separately, so we will slightly rejig the order of questions and just go to law enforcement, if that is okay, and then we will come back to Stuart McDonald on immigration.

Q363 **Simon Fell:** Thank you, Chair, for accommodating me, and thank you, Home Secretary. I want to move on to county lines. As you will be aware, it is a big issue in my own patch and across the country. I was surprised,



when talking to my chief constable, to hear that this activity has not dropped off during coronavirus; in fact, it has just shifted to new activity patterns by car. It strikes me that we have a unique opportunity in the lockdown to stamp down on this activity. I am curious to know what the Home Office is doing to tackle this during the coronavirus crisis.

Priti Patel: Thank you for your question. I have to start by paying tribute to law enforcement. Throughout coronavirus, they have been extraordinary in their work, they really have.

You have asked specifically about county lines, and to give you some insight, I will think through the process in my response to you. I do operational policing calls every day with the policing family, the law enforcement family and all the key players. It is jaw dropping, day in, day out, to hear of the level of criminal activity. Your chief constable has highlighted that they have been able to swoop up, do more gang-busting, pick up more drugs and shut down more county lines, because these individuals are out there when the rest of society is simply not out there on the streets, so they are more visible and more prevalent.

But let me just tell you—I have said this frequently throughout this crisis—that crime is evolving and becoming more sophisticated. With county lines, in particular, drug dealers—the facilitators of this abhorrent crime, who still use children and vulnerable people to perpetrate and conduct their business—are changing their model every day. They are buying taxis and using different modes of transport than they were before. That is how the cops are able to go after them.

We have been doing a number of things. For this year, we have a £25 million investment. That is being delivered through the National County Lines Coordination Centre, which is newly established. That centre has £3.6 million of funding to work across the entire law enforcement picture. That law enforcement picture will include, yes, your police force and, yes, your chief constable, but also the ROCUs, which specialise in serious organised crime and violence, as well as the National Crime Agency.

You heard at the weekend from the director general of the National Crime Agency, who reeled off some extraordinary data about the type of drugs that are not hitting our streets right now. The environment is quite challenging for criminals who are peddling drugs. In Pakistan, 700 kg of heroin was seized. We have had some extraordinary amounts of cocaine seized—I cannot share the details—literally in the last 48 to 72 hours, including four tonnes of cocaine that was picked up and is now being investigated.

Of course, the focus is also on increasing all efforts to stop supplies from coming into the UK. That is why Border Force, working with law enforcement, has been incredible. This will be a subject in the briefings you will receive when you come into the Home Office, because there is a lot of operational work taking place.



The figures and data are jaw dropping, but that should give us all a great deal of confidence in terms of what law enforcement is doing to cut the head off the snake—the suppliers—to stop the supplies from coming into the country, because this stuff is not grown in the UK, and then to get out there and tackle the facilitators of these dreadful drugs.

This morning, I spoke to Paul Crowther of the British Transport police, and he said that, even in the last few days, they have found vulnerable children who are, in effect, still being pimped and used as couriers for county lines drugs. We are able to safeguard those children now because they are so visible, and to give them support in a way that we were perhaps not able to do when society was functioning previously.

A lot of work is taking place, and there is so much more to do. We are working at an international level with law enforcement, not just in Europe, but right across South America right now. There will be quite a lot in terms of the briefings that will come your way on this.

Q364 Simon Fell: Thank you. To pick up on your final point about safeguarding, it is often vulnerable and young people who are drawn into this activity. Of course, they are not just trafficking drugs now; we risk that they are carrying a deadly virus across the UK. Could you give us some more details on what that safeguarding response from the Home Office looks like?

Priti Patel: That is a really good and important question. We are now working collaboratively—we were doing this anyway. The safeguarding of vulnerable people is multi-agency, as the Committee is fully aware. In terms of children and vulnerable victims, this is modern-day slavery and trafficking of a different kind.

We are bringing in new ways to keep both victims and frontline staff protected and functional, so that they are still able to be there to work with the police and law enforcement, social services, and safe houses and accommodation. That work is as strong as it always has been, but it is different right now because many of the agency workers are now working from home. They are still working collaboratively online from home to find safe accommodation, and we are still making sure that we are funding that and that the money goes where it needs to.

Importantly, as well as the safeguarding, we are doing the other end-to-end piece of this, which is to ensure that the perpetrators of these crimes go through the criminal justice system. Obviously, we have electronic—digital—courts right now. That is the other aspect of law enforcement applicable to the work that is taking place right now in terms of going after county lines criminals.

Chair: Thank you. Very briefly, Tim Loughton, who also has to leave to log in for Prime Minister's questions.

Q365 Tim Loughton: Home Secretary, to briefly come back to the NHS visa issue, you very helpfully sent a letter to the Committee this morning making it clear that the extension does not apply just to tier 2 visas, and



that health professionals in the NHS such as “midwives, social workers and medical radiographers” are included. There is still a lot of people who are not being included: pharmacists, physios, psychologists, and porters, without whom the NHS does not operate.

In our letter to you, we asked about the extension to social care workers; we know that social care workers and residential homes are very much on the frontline. Your letter suggests that, “The disparate nature of the social care sector makes it a unique challenge...We keep policy under review”. How likely is it that you are going to extend coverage, and can we have a full list of exactly which people will be covered? That is very important. The NHS is a large network organisation, and without those components, the whole lot will feel the effects.

Priti Patel: You are absolutely right to make that point. The answer is that, yes, of course we will be able to provide breakdowns. We do rely on the NHS. For tier 2, it is slightly easier, because we have the immigration details, but because of the disparate nature of the different categories of individuals who are doing incredible work in the NHS and the social care sector, which are under tremendous pressure right now, we rely on the information from the Department of Health and Social Care and from NHS trusts.

We are absolutely working on that, but it is very difficult—I am very clear about that—particularly for social care, because many social care providers are independent. Where social care is commissioned by NHS trusts, we will be able to gather more information and we will be able to provide that. We will provide as much detail as we can in terms of numbers.

On the classification of the individual roles that people are doing, which is the point I think you were making Mr Loughton, we will absolutely do that. My only caveat is that we do not have all this information at hand, at all. We rely on NHS Trusts, but we are also working with a social care sector that is dominated by independent providers. Trying to get information from them, at a really difficult time, is very challenging right now. They are focusing on saving lives and looking after people, so that may take time, but of course we will get you the information as soon as we can.

Q366 **Chair:** That would be very helpful, Home Secretary. We are publishing your letter on the website this morning. To follow up on that, it feels very unfair to careworkers, given that the deaths in care homes are now rising substantially and that the Health Secretary said he wanted to give careworkers parity of esteem.

It also feels very unfair to the porters and the cleaners—the people who are scrubbing the virus off the door handles, or washing the bedding or the gowns in our hospitals, that they are not included in this NHS visa extension as well. You are currently asking them to find thousands of pounds—over £10,000—to renew their visas and pay the NHS surcharge.

Can I ask, first, have you looked at applying the same criteria as the death-in-service scheme, which the Health Secretary has launched, and which goes much broader but still has defined categories? Secondly, have



you looked at using a statutory instrument, as you have done previously, to simply define groups of people who would be covered? Or, thirdly, can you simply get rid of the NHS surcharge for NHS and care workers at a time like this? To be asking them to pay thousands and thousands of pounds towards our NHS, which they themselves are contributing towards and keeping going at this time, feels very unfair.

Priti Patel: On the issue of fairness, there is equity. Obviously, we are conscious right now of the service of all NHS professionals; we should be very clear about that. This is not about segmenting or discriminating against anybody who works in the NHS. I am in daily discussions with the Department of Health and Social Care, as is the Department, and as am I directly with the Health Secretary. That is exactly why we brought in the measures that we have brought in so far. As I have already said, we review everything—everything is under review.

I must emphasise that, with social care, we are subject to some difficulties in terms of understanding and knowing the immigration background and status of individuals, particularly those who have not come through the tier 2 route. Even with the immigration surcharge, and the health surcharge in particular, that is money that goes to the NHS directly—you will be aware of that. I have been very clear: we are looking at everything in terms of reviewing positions and policies throughout this covid crisis and at what that means for the NHS. We want to put fewer burdens and pressures on it. I can absolutely give you that assurance.

Chair: Thank you. Stuart McDonald.

Q367 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Home Secretary, I think refugee charities have repeatedly said to the Department, as they have to me, that asylum seekers are currently finding it absolutely impossible to meet their basic needs on the £36 or £37 a week they are currently on. Will the Department consider following the lead of the Treasury and increasing asylum support rates by £20 a week, so they can meet their basic, essential needs?

Priti Patel: When it comes to asylum provision, obviously our country is very clear in terms of the support that we give to asylum seekers—full stop. That is not just through this difficult time. We are providing accommodation and financial assistance to those in need, while, obviously, there are limitations on travel and things of that nature. That is absolutely in line with our processes and our procedures.

We are committed to providing the right kind of support in terms of accommodation provision and financial provision. I have been very clear about that. If anybody has individual cases that they want to provide to me directly, they can do, but there are a range of protections that are already in place for asylum seekers, and that is something that we are absolutely mindful of and that we constantly look at.

Q368 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Will we look at the level of support that we currently give? It has been made clear to me that refugee charities are having to spend huge sums of money in topping up the support that the



people they work with get, because £36 a week—just over £5 a day—is not enough. Will you look at that urgently and provide them with the support that is actually needed just now?

Priti Patel: We look at all our policies; we look at them all the time. As I have said, we look at everything related to covid and are reviewing that, based on the need and on the feedback that we have, as well.

So, at the end of the day, we are absolutely making sure that people are supported—supported through accommodation, absolutely. We are making sure that people get the support that they need. If we need to do more around funding support, then that is something that the Department will absolutely look at. However, at this particular stage, our policies and our measures are working, and I have not had particular incidences, cases or examples—*[Inaudible]*. I will have a look at them.

Q369 **Stuart C. McDonald:** I would just urge you to listen to the refugee charities, who are saying that—I mean, £36 a week is tough at the best of times, but at the moment, it is absolutely impossible.

Another issue that has been raised is access to section 4 support. Many more asylum seekers whose cases have been refused will be eligible for support now, but I am being told that they are finding it almost impossible to get a speedy response or to access that support. So, again, could I ask the Home Office to work with refugee charities to make sure that there is a streamlined process in place and that people are able to access the support that they urgently require?

Priti Patel: First of all, the answer is yes. When it comes to support, we absolutely make sure that we have support. We have providers, obviously—Migrant Help. Shona can come in on the operational side, in terms of the type of support that we are providing and how we are doing that at this particular time, because, obviously, we are looking at this through the covid lens and at how functions have changed.

If I could bring in Shona Dunn, she can speak slightly more about the type of support that we are bringing in and the work that we are doing.

Shona Dunn: Thank you, Home Secretary. As you say, the key thing to note here is that—you have been very clear—we are extending to the end of June the ability for anyone who has had their case decided, and asylum seekers may stay in the accommodation that they have been provided.

We are also continuing to provide other support. Asylum seekers in dispersed accommodation can continue to get support, as you say, Home Secretary, through Migrant Help and working with NGOs, where they have particular vulnerabilities, where they are unable to self-isolate or socially distance in the way expected.

That includes, for example, looking at where we need to provide additional help with food, where we might need to provide mobile phones, and where we might need to provide additional welfare support or welfare calls. This is an incredibly challenging time for everybody, and I think the Home



Office has done everything it can to focus on the needs of those individuals.

Q370 Stuart C. McDonald: You say you have done everything you can, but you could increase asylum support by £20 a week. Could you also look at access to section 4 support, because I understand that it is taking an awful long time for people to get access to that?

Shona Dunn: I am certainly very happy to come back to you specifically on the time taken to access section 4 support; if there is an issue there, I am very happy to pick it up.

On the overall level of financial support, the Home Office does of course look at the level of financial support to asylum seekers on a very regular basis, and we will undertake that annual review of the financial support to asylum seekers.

It is worth pointing out that the basis on which we determine financial support to asylum seekers is very different to the basis on which universal credit is determined by DWP. So, we wouldn't automatically—

Q371 Stuart C. McDonald: But that is your choice. You could, if you want, increase asylum support in the next few days by £20. You don't have to go through that process; there are other ways you could do it. You have to recognise that this is just as demanding on these households as on every other household.

Shona Dunn: Absolutely, and I am also conscious of the fact that the individuals who receive that support also receive accommodation and have utilities covered, and a variety of other support is provided to those individuals. That is one of the reasons why the basis on which we arrive at that financial support is different to the basis on which DWP will arrive at the decisions they make.

I take the point entirely. We do keep these matters under review—this is under review. I am happy to update the Select Committee at a later point on our conclusions on that.

Chair: Thank you. Laura Farris—we are turning to domestic abuse now.

Q372 Laura Farris: Thank you very much, Chair; thank you, Home Secretary. You will be aware that the Select Committee published its report on domestic abuse during the coronavirus crisis on Monday.

One of the things you have said this morning is that the situation has moved on quite a lot from March, when some of the processes were first put in place. Can I ask you firstly about vulnerable children? One of the things that we heard evidence on and that has become clear, particularly since term started, is that some of the vulnerable children who could go to school are not being sent to school. We have also had discussions as a Committee and with the Children's Commissioner about the ability of social workers to go into their homes. What steps do you have in mind for children's services, and what extra protections is the Home Office putting in place for vulnerable children?



Priti Patel: This is a really important area. My Department and I have been very clear that we have got a solid strategy on domestic abuse. I led the discussions—probably seven weeks ago—in Government about vulnerable children and how, through the Government’s approach of keeping schools open, particularly for key workers, we must absolutely ensure that vulnerable children are supported. The Children’s Commissioner has been central to many of the discussions, and I commend Annie for the work that she is doing in this area.

You specifically asked about the Home Office and our role in this. This is obviously cutting across Government, so I am working with Gavin Williamson, the Cabinet Office and many others on this. With vulnerable children, there are issues around safeguarding. Safeguarding and protecting them is absolutely crucial. We will come to some of the other issues around children in a minute, but that is the No. 1 focus. We are working with MHCLG, which is central to this in terms of the role of social work.

We have just been speaking about social care and how there is an independent structure there, but the independent structure around schooling—academies and local authorities have data and information about children—has to feed into the work of central Government and the type of support that we can actually provide.

Central to this—it is not Home Office-specific but cross-Government—is understanding who those vulnerable children are: kids on care plans and kids who have been identified as vulnerable for all the so many awful reasons that we know, for safeguarding reasons. Some of the schools and local authorities, with support from central Government, are then bringing that information and data together to provide support, so that social workers are still keeping in touch. It is keeping in touch that is just so vital and so essential.

That work is obviously not Home Office-led; it is MHCLG-led, but it is being overseen by the Cabinet Office. There is a public service committee where this is looked at and reviewed on a weekly basis. That work is taking place. The Children’s Commissioner feeds into that and we are all heavily involved in it.

Child protection, safeguarding, the criminality side and the information that we pick up through law enforcement, but schools as well—we are all part of one big network in ensuring that vulnerable children are safeguarded, protected from violence and protected from harm. We want to make sure that they are protected from harm, but also that they are being fed.

The purpose of keeping schools open was to safeguard children, but also to make sure that they are being fed and that their families are being catered for. In the ever-complicated world of central Government, what I can describe as a multi-agency approach is still taking place. It is a really difficult area and really sensitive, for all the reasons that we know about.

Every child is different; every child has unique circumstances around them.

Q373 **Laura Farris:** The other two questions I have are about the funding allocation that has been made to deal with domestic abuse. I think it would be fair to say that we now have preliminary evidence of a spike in domestic abuse.

There are two things that came out of the evidence sessions that we had with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, the Victims' Commissioner and small groups from women's refuges—Imkaan was one of the groups that appeared. Quite a large amount of funding has been made available, but there was a concern that it was going to be distributed by local authorities and PCCs. Imkaan in particular was an example of a group that was not really plugged into those networks, so we would not necessarily be on their horizon. I was wondering what the answer was on that.

Priti Patel: I have very strong views on this whole issue. First, I have been very clear about support around domestic abuse and hidden harms. On the children's side, there is a lot of work that has been taking place, obviously, with online abuse and things of that nature. Specifically on domestic abuse, there are a number of points to make.

On the support that has been asked for, I am going to be very specific with regard to covid. We have information, but we do not have, and I should be clear about this—obviously, from refuges, helplines and so on, we have seen a surge in demand, which is more calls coming in and more referrals online. Policing data shows that there are no trends per se, but obviously we have to collect that data and aggregate it over time.

The police have made domestic abuse an absolutely priority. We have seen loads of arrests. The Metropolitan police published some data at the beginning of the week, or at the weekend, on the number of arrests they have been making. I have seen much more data in that space.

Specifically on funding, we are working directly with the sector. There are a range of organisations in the sector—small, medium and large. On the support that we have provided, I will first speak about the £2 million.

Chair: Home Secretary, may I interrupt for a second? We still have Dehenna Davison and Adam Holloway to ask questions. Would you mind going for an extra five minutes? Then you can carry on answering the question.

Priti Patel: Of course; that is absolutely fine.

On the £2 million that I have allocated and announced straight from the Department, that is specifically to bolster and support the capability and capacity that we are basically hearing that there is a need for from the organisations themselves. That is for domestic abuse services, because let us not forget, their ways of working have changed as well because of



lockdown. People are at home and are working from home. They have needed laptops. They have needed specialist helpline support and so on.

There is a bigger bid. The Chancellor announced a bid of £750 million that will go to charities. I specifically asked him to reference domestic abuse charities, and he did that. There is a bid that I am working with him on right now for a substantial amount of money, which will come—obviously, that has to go through the proper financial process.

I have already said to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and to the Victims' Commissioner as well, in a discussion that I had with them on Monday evening, very specifically, that they must have a role to play in working with the Home Office on the allocations and the type of organisations the money goes to. That is primarily because they are able to, and I think we are able to, get a much more holistic view of the sector and where there are needs, basically, to provide less bureaucracy.

At the end of the day, once we have gone through a funding process with central Government, and that money comes to the Department in the right kind of way, we should absolutely be able to disseminate that, working with third parties. So that is absolutely what we will be doing.

Laura Farris: I had another question, but I do not think there is time, so I will hand over to one of the others. Thank you.

Q374 **Dehenna Davison:** Thank you, Home Secretary, for agreeing to be with us today. On the funding to support domestic abuse charities with regard to helplines and so on, when is that likely to hit the frontline?

Priti Patel: We are working with the Treasury right now on bids, so I have put specific bids in. Obviously, they have to come out through that due diligence process. There are lots of things. You know, when you work in Government, there are absolutely appropriate financial measures that we have to go through.

Once I know what those allocations are, I have been very clear to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and the Victims' Commissioner that we will be working to effectively get that money in the Department and then get it out immediately. I will work with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and the Victims' Commissioner on that. I think it is important that those who work in the sector, who understand where the needs are and where the demands and pressures are, work with us to facilitate that money and that support going out. We have to do that in the right kind of way, so we have the right kind of financial efficacy and the right model around it, but it is my priority to get that money to people ASAP.

At the same time, we have been working with the sector. The support that they have been asking for has been factored into the bids that we have put through to the Treasury, so the objective is to get that out soon.

Q375 **Dehenna Davison:** Specifically on the £2 million that has already been announced, has any of that hit the frontlines already?

Priti Patel: We are already putting that out, because that £2 million is being spent, I guess, doubling up in terms of providing additional support. It is about capacity. With technological support, for example, we have done a deal with Fujitsu, and we are providing expertise and specialist helplines. That is already going out. What will come forward is separate to the £2 million, but there are processes that we have to work through, and rightly so.

Q376 **Dehenna Davison:** I have a question about exiting from lockdown. Much as we need to look at the situation now, we also need to look ahead and start planning for the future. What work has the Home Office done to plan for the strategy coming out of coronavirus?

Priti Patel: There is a cross-Government strategy. On this point, I should bring in the permanent sec, Matthew Rycroft, because he has been working across Government on this. But specifically on the Home Office, it would be remiss of me not to factor in that we have a wide range of stakeholders and a wide range of Home Office issues that have to be considered in alleviation measures for moving out of lockdown in a calibrated way.

Law enforcement and policing is one of them. If you look at the remarkable work of policing right now and the legislation and regs that came in back in March, with the four Es around engagement and around community before we get to enforcement, policing has been central to that. So policing and the Home Office as a whole are working with the Cabinet Office in what is quite an extraordinary piece of work right now across Government. Can I bring in Matthew? Matthew is heavily involved in this, and he can provide you with some insights specifically on the work that he is leading here.

Matthew Rycroft: Thank you, Home Secretary. Thank you, Chair. Can I begin by thanking you for your warm welcome? I look forward to working with you as you hold us to account on the important work that the Home Office does.

In answer to the Home Secretary's point about governance for the covid response and the Home Office's involvement in preparations for whatever comes next, I can reassure you that the Home Secretary herself, through the ministerial implementation groups, and Home Office officials, through our involvement in our groups, are absolutely central to the cross-Government work. We just need to make sure that the health aspects, economic aspects and Home Office aspects are all taken forward in parallel, and it is our job to ensure that that happens.

There is a lot of work going on, as you would expect, looking at all of the different types of measures that we have at the moment, and potential future measures, to ensure that they are enforceable. We are working with our brilliant law enforcement partners to make sure that all the risks and responsibilities on the Home Office side are taken account of.

Q377 **Dehenna Davison:** One specific issue that has been raised by my own



chief constable is a concern about when lockdown measures start to be lifted, particularly for licensed premises, and whether that will create a cliff edge whereby no one is using the pubs, and then suddenly there is a huge rise in demand that could lead to issues not only in terms of crime but in terms of the virus spreading. Is that something that is being considered?

Matthew Rycroft: Through the daily calls that the Home Secretary has with police chiefs, they have made those sorts of concerns abundantly clear, and the Home Secretary is using that to—*[Inaudible]*—take forward those sorts of issues in cross-Government planning, which is well under way.

Chair: Thank you. Next we have Adam Holloway, who is on audio.

Q378 **Adam Holloway:** Thank you, Chair. Home Secretary, can I thank you, the civil service and the Government on behalf of the vast majority of my constituents, irrespective of how they vote, for how you have been dealing with this miserable situation?

Priti Patel: Thank you, Adam. It has been extraordinary, I have to say, and I pay tribute to everybody. It has been such a privilege to work across policing and law enforcement and the civil service, and to look at the way in which everybody has been operationalising and coming together. Plus I have to say to the British public, as I have said publicly previously, that the spirit of national unity that the country has shown at the time of this health emergency has been really quite remarkable, and the way in which the public has kept going inspires us all; it really does.

Q379 **Adam Holloway:** On to the exit strategy, clearly it is all about protecting NHS capacity in order to save lives. However, thank God, the NHS is not currently at capacity. Is there an argument, on a trial and voluntary basis, to unlock specific work sectors based on specific geographies and based on individual risk profiles, while also balancing the risk to NHS capacity and obviously keeping the R0 number beneath 1?

Priti Patel: There is a lot of work taking place—Matthew has just touched on that. There are lots of assessments. I am not at liberty to go into the details of some of the discussions that are taking place.

I think that the fact that, for example, testing is now dramatically upscaling will clearly have an impact in terms of hopefully giving greater public confidence to people to eventually go back to work—but even before people go back to work, there is a job to do yet in terms of securing workplaces. The fact of the matter is that we will not go back to how we were in early March. There will be new norms that inevitably come off the way in which social distancing is now dominating our lives and is affecting society.

Social distancing is taking place in my own place of work. We would expect social distancing in every single work area, whether it is an office or a construction site, and social distancing on public transport. These are all active things that, rightly, we have to test and put through consideration.

I think everybody across Government has worked night and day to ensure that the NHS was not overwhelmed and that we could protect the NHS by growing capacity. If we come back to those five tests, making sure that there is a sustained and consistent fall in the daily death rate and a decrease in infection will, in its own right, have an impact on the R value. On making sure that we can operationalise, the fact is that to move into a new normal we will, as a society, have to operationalise new ways of working. Of course, they have to be tested, employers have to embrace them and guidance will have to come from Government.

From a Home Office perspective, on the work that we have done on an operational perspective, whether with Border Force or with passport offices as well as on our own office spaces, we have third-party assurance in terms of the measures that we have put into place. That is now being fed into the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Cabinet Office in terms of how we can get the public sector working. How we are social distancing in our offices is being fed into some of the guidance and work that BEIS is undertaking. There are so many workstreams to be prepared.

You are absolutely right that we have to consider all of that in looking at how we move into that phased, calibrated approach, because we cannot remain in this situation indefinitely. We are obviously going to have to lead that. We will be leading that through putting guidance out there into the public domain to employers, engaging with trade unions and many others, as my Department and the Government are doing.

Q380 Adam Holloway: Can I just make the point that one doesn't have to do everything at the same time, and that the R0 should on average be below 1, although you could let it run higher elsewhere?

Priti Patel: Absolutely, and that is my point about having a calibrated and phased approach. We cannot do everything all at once. There is no doubt that this will have to be looked at through that very lens—through this phased approach that everyone in Government is looking at and considering right now.

Chair: Thank you very much, Home Secretary, permanent secretary and second permanent secretary. We very much appreciate your time and convey again our thanks to all the staff and the organisations and police and so on that you work with.

There were a few questions that we were not able to cover. We hope to be able to do so at the private briefing on Tuesday of next week, or we will write to you. I think that Laura had some further questions around domestic abuse and Holly had a further question around testing for police officers; that would also cover Border Force staff. It would also be helpful to have some further information on testing at airports.

I would highlight one of the points in your letter that we published this morning, which we have not covered, but which I think was immensely important. We asked you previously about what provisions would be made



HOUSE OF COMMONS

for the families of those who died while on the frontline in both social care and the NHS. We strongly welcome your confirmation that the dependents in that sad situation will be granted an immediate indefinite leave to remain without a requirement to pay a fee. We welcome that.

Given that the Foreign Secretary has just confirmed that 23 care workers have died from covid-19 now, can I also ask you to look again at the visa extension issues around care workers, porters and other hospital staff—cleaners and so on—as well?

Finally, we look forward to the further information that you have promised us around the science and the scientific advice to the Home Office. That would be immensely welcome. Thank you very much for your time today.

Priti Patel: Thank you.